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**“More Than Just Film” :
Rebranding Independence on IFC**

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**“More Than Just Film” :
Rebranding Independence on IFC**

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“More Than Just Film” : Rebranding Independence on IFC

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In 2010, IFC (formerly Independent Film Channel) underwent a major rebrand campaign, which included a redesigned logo, tagline, and channel name; a transition to ad-supported programming and airing films with commercial interruptions; a reliance on original scripted comedy series; an emphasis on so-called “blockbuster” indies over lesser-known films; and a general de-emphasis of independent film as the core of the brand identity. The features of the rebrand closely mirrored actions already taken by other film-based cable channels, most notably IFC’s current parent channel, AMC (formerly American Movie Classics). In refashioning the IFC brand identity, IFC executives seized upon the instability of the term *independent* within existing discourses around independent film and music production and constructed a looser definition—one that was no longer rooted in independent film and also hailed a very specific gendered, raced, and classed audience in order to attract new advertisers. This project contextualizes IFC’s pre- and post-rebrand brand identity within the American independent film and music movements that began in the late 1980s and continued into the 1990s before analyzing the paratextual means through which the post-2010 IFC brand identity has been constructed, including upfront presentations, trade press coverage, press releases, on-air promotional spots, materials for prospective advertisers, images from graphic design agency portfolios, and IFC employee instructional guides on the use of language and image following the rebrand. Finally, this project examines how IFC has constructed its niche cable viewership following the rebrand in order to deliver the traditional commodity audience to its advertisers. Together, these analyses form a compelling look at the shifting discourses of independent cultural production and how independent-ness is situated within IFC’s construction of a niche cable brand identity.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
INTRODUCTION: REBRANDING INDEPENDENCE ON IFC.....	1
A Cable Destination for Independent Film: The Construction of IFC's Brand Identity from 1994 to 2009	3
Post-Network Niche Cable Channels and Brand Identities	11
Niche Cable Genealogies: Rebranding Film Channels Before IFC	16
Theoretical Considerations and Methodology.....	24
Chapter Overview	29
CHAPTER ONE: DEFINING INDEPENDENCE: THE DISCURSIVE EVOLUTION OF <i>INDIE</i>	32
Perspectives on Independent-ness	34
<i>Indie</i> vs. <i>Independent</i>	40
The Discursive Genealogy of Independent Film.....	41
Cultural Cousins: Indie Music and Independent Film	44
CHAPTER TWO: "MORE THAN JUST FILM": EXPANDING INDEPENDENCE	50
Always On. Slightly Off.: Rebranding the IFC Logo and Tagline	52
"No Longer Just About Film": A New Programming Strategy.....	56
Now With Commercial Interruptions: Original Scripted Programming and Advertiser Support.....	65
CHAPTER THREE: CHANNELING IDENTITIES: <i>PORTLANDIA</i> AND THE (GENDERED) INDIE COMMODITY AUDIENCE	66
Niche Cable Channels and the Commodity Audience.....	68
"Wherever Indie Lives": <i>Portlandia</i> as IFC's Signature Series	73
CONCLUSION	89
Contributions.....	89

Limitations	91
Future Directions	93
Bibliography	95

List of Tables

Table 1.1: MPAA Theatrical Market Statistics	36
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List of Figures

Figure 2.1:	IFC Logos From 1994 to Present.....	54
Figure 2.2:	The redesigned logo's imperfections.....	55
Figure 2.3:	Stills from the IFC "Get It?" Promo (2010)	58
Figure 2.4:	Stills from undated, untitled Gyllenhaal promo (ca. 2007)	61
Figure 2.5:	"Our Language: Words to Use/Words to Lose."	63
Figure 3.1:	"Who We Are."	80
Figure 3.2:	"Meet Our Competitors."	85

Introduction

Rebranding Independence on IFC

American Movie Classics has devolved into just plain old AMC and, like the fast food chain KFC, refers to itself exclusively by acronym to shroud the content of its product. The word “Classics” no longer applies, as you could watch AMC for days and never see one. The schedule used to boast Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton festivals, and films such as Katharine Hepburn’s debut in *A Bill of Divorcement*, and the rarely-screened Frank Capra feature *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*. Now, AMC is home to *Halloween IV*, *RoboCop*, *Mary Reilly*, *Saturn 3*, and marathons devoted to the cinematic *oeuvre* of Elvis Presley.

David Hofstede, “#99: American Movie Classics Goes Commercial.” *What Were They Thinking?: The 100 Dumbest Events in Television History* (3).

The above quote, published in pop-culture writer David Hofstede’s 2004 screed *What Were They Thinking?: The 100 Dumbest Events in Television History*, describes the first phase of cable channel American Movie Classics’ rebrand into AMC. The second phase would come only three years later, when the channel made a name for itself as a purveyor of quality original drama series with the success of *Mad Men* (2007-), a subject I deal with in greater depth below. Unfortunately for Hofstede and other movie-buff television viewers, AMC was not the first film channel to radically restructure its content and rebrand its image, nor would it be the last. In 2010, after sixteen years on the air, Independent Film Channel launched a similarly comprehensive rebranding campaign, which, like AMC’s rebrand, deemphasized film as the core of the channel’s brand identity and necessitated a name change to simply “IFC.” Starting with a new promotional campaign that featured a redesigned logo and a new tagline—“Always on. Slightly off.”—, IFC began aggressively pursuing a narrowed segment of the cable

audience using an expanded slate of both original and acquired comedy series, as well as a newly wide-reaching definition of independent film. The strategy, according to IFC's then-executive vice president (and current president) Jennifer Caserta, was to offer "sharp, cool, and twisted" comedy series, which were ostensibly popular with the cable channel's audience, which IFC reported to be overwhelmingly young, male, white, and affluent (Guthrie). In the years preceding the rebrand, the channel had already been acquiring cult comedy series like *Arrested Development* (Fox 2003-2006), *Kids in the Hall* (CBC 1988-1994), and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC 1969-1974), and Caserta has described the addition of original scripted comedy programming as the logical next step, "the way that you can continue to refine and define your brand and be distinctive" (Goldsmith).

This thesis aims to explore how IFC (re)defined its brand identity and the very word *independent* in order to compete with cable channels that consistently rank high in television ratings. The channel's new brand identity hinged upon original comedy series and a more broadly defined indie culture rather than independent features and indie film culture. In order to attract the advertisers needed to bankroll its original programming, IFC began aggressively marketing itself to the highly gendered commodity audience traditionally sought by broadcast networks while still claiming to appeal to a niche "indie" audience with superior cultural tastes. At its core, this project's objective is to examine how the discourses of indieness that stemmed from the independent film and music scenes of the 1990s have been deployed and manipulated by a television channel

in order to construct a brand identity and attract viewers in the saturated, highly competitive niche cable market of the post-network television era. Furthermore, the intersection of film and television on IFC make the channel's rebrand an excellent case study of the complex corporate and industrial connections between these two mediums, and IFC's ability to present itself as a non-gender-specific niche channel while aggressively targeting male viewers places the rebrand squarely within the historical context of gendered constructions of both film and television viewers. I address the implications of IFC's rebrand campaign for independent film culture and the gendering of the indie audience from different perspectives over the course of this thesis project. Before I outline the work of the following three chapters, however, I will begin by providing some background on IFC's rebrand campaign and its relationship to earlier rebranding efforts by film channels that have shifted their programming emphasis and brand identity toward original television series.

A Cable Destination For Independent Film: The Construction of IFC's Brand Identity from 1994 to 2009

Prior to the rebrand, IFC had built its brand identity around airing independent films uncut, uncensored, and without commercial interruption. It debuted September 1st, 1994—a key year in the independent film explosion of the 1990s that saw the release of commercially successful indies like *Reality Bites*, *Clerks*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and *Pulp Fiction*—as a spinoff of cable channel Bravo. IFC launched with the intention of

attracting the well-educated, affluent niche audience of independent and foreign films that had been tuning into Bravo's weekly airings of independent films but were frustrated with the channel's inability to program uncensored material. As a pay-cable channel that had to be purchased separately, IFC would not be subject to the same censorship requirements as its sister channel, which was offered as part of a basic-cable package and thus held to stricter standards by advertisers (Dempsey). Early programming on IFC was dedicated to the work of "established independents," with an initial lineup featuring individual films by Jarmusch, Jonathan Demme, and Volker Schlöndorff and specially curated marathons or "festivals" featuring the work of auteurs like Kurosawa, Truffaut, and Cassavetes (Dunning). The ability and willingness to air uncut and uncensored films featured heavily in IFC's promotional discourse at the time of its launch, and the cable channel's emphasis on independent films as art objects allowed it to develop strong working relationships with well-known players in the independent film scene. By the time the channel went live, IFC had secured licensing deals with established independent distributors like October, Janus, Fine Line, and Sony Pictures Classics and recruited well-respected independent directors for its advisory board, which was headed by Scorsese himself and included Robert Altman, Spike Lee, Joel and Ethan Coen, and Jim Jarmusch among its members (Taubin).

IFC's early promotional discourse frequently cited this ability to air uncensored films as the channel's most distinctive feature—one of the channel's early taglines was "Always, uncut.", which would later inspire the rebrand's less film-specific tagline of the

rebrand: “Always on. Slightly off.” In interviews with the trade and popular press, Bravo and IFC executives often aligned IFC’s lack of censorship and commercial interruptions with a respect for the film as art object and for the director’s vision. For example, at the time of IFC’s launch, Jonathan Sehring, Bravo’s vice president of programming in 1994 and one of the creators of IFC, described support from filmmakers as playing a part in the formation IFC, telling *The Village Voice*:

No one [at Bravo] is comfortable with the editing policy...That’s one of the reasons for starting IFC. Martin Scorsese was irate when we edited *Who’s That Knocking at My Door?* When we explained the situation, he said, ‘We’ve got to do something about this’ (Taubin).

Sharing this anecdote, and invoking Scorsese’s name in particular, is a clear attempt to promote IFC as providing an important service, advocating for filmmakers and preserving and protecting the artistic integrity of films—thus treating their programmed films as art objects, implying that *independent film* is interchangeable with *art film*.

In the years following IFC’s debut, programming was curated according to recurring themes like “Cult Classics,” “The Masters,” “New Voices,” “Director’s Choice,” in which a featured director selected favorites of his or her own films and introduced them on air, and “People We Like,” which highlighted the lesser-known films of successful actors (Dunning). Such a programming slate was possible because, aside from its licensing agreements with a small number of distributors, IFC mostly relied on its access to Bravo’s film library. This meant very low programming costs for the startup channel, and likely made IFC’s launch financially viable, though Sehring dismissed the suggestion that IFC’s selection of films would overlap with Bravo’s, stating that IFC

would “go deeper into the classic-foreign-film libraries than Bravo does” (Dempsey). Indeed, many of the foreign films screened during IFC’s early days on the air, including *Yojimbo* (Japan, 1961), *Day For Night* (France, 1973), *Angel at My Table* (New Zealand, 1990) and *Life is Sweet* (UK, 1990), were already held by Bravo’s film library (Dempsey).

While IFC sought to establish a strong connection with the independent film movement from its earliest days on the air, an early decision not to partner with Robert Redford and The Sundance Film Festival would set the cable channel apart as a unique individual player in the industry. While IFC was still in the development process in the early nineties, Robert Redford approached Bravo and proposed forming a relationship between IFC and Sundance that would result in a single independent film channel to be called “Sundance/IFC” (Finnigan and Tourmarkine). Bravo ultimately declined to move forward with Redford’s proposal, however, in part because Redford wanted to maintain a high degree of creative control and also because Bravo executives did not feel the new channel should be aligned with a single film festival. IFC’s first president, Kathleen Dore, told *The Hollywood Reporter* that the dual network identity was confusing for focus groups, and dismissed Sundance as too corporate a brand for the up-and-coming cable channel (Finnigan and Tourmarkine). Redford ultimately developed The Sundance Channel in a partnership with Showtime, and the project launched in 1996. After over a decade of rivalry between the two channels, IFC’s parent company Rainbow Media (now AMC Networks) purchased The Sundance Channel for \$496 million in 2008 (Stelter “Cablevision Unit Buys Sundance Channel”). This acquisition made Sundance and IFC

sibling channels, and they were even marketed to advertisers as a unit and touted as attracting the same sort of sophisticated, socially well-connected viewer (“Indienomics”). Ultimately, the acquisition of The Sundance Channel primed IFC for its shift away from independent film in 2010, providing another platform that could remain dedicated exclusively to film screenings.

From the time of the channel’s inception, IFC executives planned to buy exclusive film rights after expanding to more cable systems, as well as offer funding to feature and short independent films, using the UK’s Channel 4 as a model for these plans (Dempsey). These goals have gradually been realized over the years as IFC’s presence in the world of independent film has grown. While the cable channel IFC has diversified its content to include original television series, it has given its name to IFC Entertainment, a subsidiary of AMC Networks with involvement in film production (IFC Productions, founded in 1997), distribution (IFC Films, launched in 2000) and exhibition (the IFC Center, located on Manhattan’s Lower West Side since 2005) (AMC Networks Inc.). The largest of these is the channel’s film distribution company, IFC Films. First launched in 2000, it started out as a small-time distributor of indie films that were critically well received but did not perform well at the box office—Alisa Perren cites *Happy Accidents* (2000), *The Business of Strangers* (2001), and *Go Tigers!* (2001) as examples (“A Big Fat Indie Success Story?” 22). IFC Films soon struck gold in 2002 after securing the distribution rights to *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), a film that the major distributors and larger independents had declined to acquire. The staggering

commercial success of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and, to a lesser extent, Alfonso Cuarón's *Y Tu Mamá También* (2001), whose North American distribution was also handled by IFC that year, cemented IFC's position as a key player in the independent film market (22). Now one of the top buyers at Sundance, IFC Films added genre label IFC Midnight in 2010, which has released titles as diverse as *The Human Centipede* horror franchise and Lars Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009), and, since acquiring The Sundance Channel in 2008, "prestige" label Sundance Selects, which has released foreign films—*Certified Copy* (2010), *L'Amour Fou* (2010)—as well as Werner Herzog's documentaries *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) and *Into the Abyss* (2011) and Lena Dunham's film *Tiny Furniture* (2010) (AMC Networks). All of IFC's distribution subsidiaries employ a day and date distribution model, meaning films are simultaneously released in theaters and on video on demand (VOD).

The cable channel began supplementing its film content with syndicated cult television shows in the mid-2000s along with a small slate of original programs—mostly unscripted talk shows like *Dinner for Five* (2001-2005), hosted by director Jon Favreau, *The Henry Rollins Show* (2004-2007), hosted by musician Henry Rollins, and *The IFC Media Project*, a news program hosted by former MTV News correspondent Gideon Yago. In 2010, IFC revealed that it was undergoing a major rebrand effort, the centerpiece of which was a new emphasis on original scripted comedy series. With original television programs now at the center of the cable channel's brand identity, IFC began deemphasizing film in its promotional material and in its programming schedule. This

meant the creation of a new logo and slogan—previous iterations contained references to film—as well as the discontinued use of the name “Independent Film Channel.” Following the rebrand, the channel’s name would simply be IFC.

As of this writing, IFC’s rebranding efforts and the resulting lineup of original comedy series are three years out, enabling this project is to gauge the short-term success of the campaign. The new strategy seems to have quite literally paid off for IFC. The cable channel formerly aired movies without commercial interruptions and relied on a sponsorship model, selling blocks of airtime to advertisers, rather than the more traditional ad-supported model, which entails selling commercial segments that air during specific programs. The latter model of television advertising was adopted as part of the rebrand strategy and brought over fifty new advertisers to IFC in 2011 alone. The cable channel’s signature post-rebrand show, *Portlandia* (2011-) brought IFC its highest ratings ever, and the second season of the series brought double the ratings of the first (P&L Media). *Portlandia* was also the biggest critical success for IFC, winning a 2011 Peabody Award, and became a presence in popular culture, inspiring commercial deals for its stars and intertextual relationships with other television shows. Aside from the success of *Portlandia*, original scripted comedies like *The Increasingly Poor Decisions of Todd Margaret* (2009-) and *Comedy Bang! Bang!* (2012-) have performed so well for IFC that the network has only added more to its programming lineup; at IFC’s 2013 upfront—the annual presentation a television network or cable channel puts on for its prospective and current advertisers—the channel announced that it has twelve half-hour scripted comedy series

in various stages of development. These include *Spoils of Babylon*, a miniseries co-produced by comedy video site Funny or Die co-founders Will Ferrell and Adam McKay; *Garfunkel & Oates*, a scripted series starring the eponymous comedy-folk duo; and *International Plan*, a scripted comedy about two friends on a trip around the world, co-written and created by *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon* writers Michael Bleiden and Eric Ledgin (Andreeva).

Following the commercial success of IFC's rebrand, this project seeks to identify the factors that have contributed to that success. The promotional discourse circulated in advertising materials and trade press interviews with IFC executives makes no secret that the rebrand was an aggressive effort to boost audience numbers and strengthen the company's brand, but there are numerous additional factors at play. IFC's rebrand in 2010, which featured a new corporate philosophy, logo, tagline, and emphasis on original scripted comedies, signaled the network's de-emphasis on independent films in favor of diversified investment in a variety of media that fit a more broadly defined "indie culture." IFC's promotional discourse for its new programming direction used the term *indie* not to describe the production of its films, or even to refer to films at all, but to denote a lifestyle and set of tastes that are inspired by the "spirit" of independent filmmaking. The redirection of IFC is symptomatic of the increasing importance of original scripted programming for niche cable channels, particularly those that formerly relied heavily or even exclusively on movies to fill their programming hours—channels like IFC's original parent channel, Bravo, its current parent channel, AMC, and its niche-

cable rival FX. The decreasing importance of independent film to IFC's cable brand identity is also indicative of the lack of an identifiable independent cinema "movement" of the sort that existed at the time of IFC's launch as well as the instability of the term *indie*, as truly independent film producers and distributors are purchased and folded into the major entertainment conglomerates.

Post-Network Niche Cable Channels and Brand Identities

The post-network era is commonly understood as beginning in mid-1980s, when the emergence of new networks, particularly Fox, challenged the long-held domination of the "Big Three" broadcast networks (NBC, ABC, and CBS). Amanda Lotz describes the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, however, as a "multi-channel transition," a time during which the number of channels rapidly multiplied due to cable and satellite technologies but the industry continued its network-era practices and structure (*The Television Will Be Revolutionized* 7). Lotz marks the beginning of the post-network era as the mid-2000s, when changes in the competitive norms and industrial operations became pronounced enough to qualify this period as radically different from the network era.

The advent of cable television coincided with what social theorist Naomi Klein calls the "brand equity mania of the eighties," a trend that continued into the nineties as corporations with high-concept brand identities—Klein cites Nike, Apple, and Absolut Vodka as examples—brought in staggering profits. During this time, writes Klein,

“‘Brands, not products!’ became the rallying cry for a marketing renaissance led by a new breed of companies that saw themselves as ‘meanings brokers’ instead of product producers” (21). A key factor in the success of this breed of “lifestyle marketing,” in which advertisements peddled a lifestyle over the product itself, was the newly expanding youth market—1992 was the first year in nearly two decades that the number of American teenagers increased—and advertisers’ aggressive fetishization and targeting of young people, whom they believed would pay a premium for “cool” unlike their budget-conscious parents (Klein 68). The lifestyle marketing and the fetishization of youth that Klein identifies with the late eighties and nineties is directly descended from the “hip consumerism” of the 1960s, when advertisers came to rely heavily on the music and imagery of counterculture to market to young consumers (Frank 31).

Cable networks were not immune to this branding fever, and in fact most cable firms saw the strategy as their key to survival in an increasingly competitive market. As Sarah Murray points out in her work on Cooking Channel’s branding strategy, this type of lifestyle marketing was extremely well suited to niche cable channels looking to set themselves apart in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Murray argues that niche programming typically forms on the basis of either an identity or an interest, and in an attempt to capture a segment of the television audience that is under-marketed, cable channels “construct brands that articulate how one identifies and lives his or her life” (28). In the case of Cooking Channel, Murray argues, the channel’s brand seeks to trade on both categories via the interest of cookie and the identity of the foodie. The same goes for IFC, with its initial brand identity centered on the common interest of independent film, and the

rebranded identity focusing upon the kind of person who might be interested in independent film and other independent cultural products. This is evidenced by post-rebrand IFC promos and materials for prospective advertisers that claim the channel's viewers are part of a select group—those who “get it” and are ahead of the curve when it comes to culture that is cool and innovative

According to Joseph Turow, cable networks needed to attract a portion of the broad, multi-demographic “mass” audience sought by broadcast networks in order to boost their ratings position, but also sought a “super core” audience of devoted viewers, preferably from a specific, desirable demographic that could then be sold to advertisers (104). The networks' solution to this issue, Turow argues, was to program according to a three-part brand-building strategy. The first was to establish a promotional strategy and recognizable image—including techniques like placing the cable channel's logo on the screen at all times to help viewers instantly identify it while channel surfing (Turow 104). The second was to air what Turow calls “compatible reruns,” familiar syndicated material that was carefully selected to fit into the identity of the network and was meant to entice a broad swath of the broadcast audience, and, primarily, to fill the twenty-four-hour schedule on the cheap. The third component was to create original “signature programming” that conveyed not only the brand identity of the network but the desired audience, which was often mirrored by the show's central characters. The brand-building block over which networks exercise maximum control, signature programming consists of a show or group of shows around which all other programming and indeed the network's brand identity is organized, functioning as “an explicit on-air statement to

audiences and advertisers about the personality of the network” (Turow 105). According to Turow, a cable channel’s signature program or programs could either hail its audience implicitly or explicitly. Turow cites The Discovery Channel’s *Invention* (1990) and A&E’s *Biography* (1997-) among the signature series that implied their desired viewership, “that by their very existence in the center of prime time signaled that those networks stood for an upscale, highly educated audience” (105-106). The classic example of the direct approach, says Turow, is MTV’s promotion of the animated series *Beavis and Butt-head* (1993-), a show known for its irreverent and crass humor. “Far from hiding the program, though,” Turow writes, “MTV showcased it, using it at the beginning and end of its evening schedule. In this role as the network’s prime-time bookends, the series tagged its channel with a hard-edged anti-authority personality” (106).

IFC’s rebranding strategies employ all three elements articulated by Turow. As a film channel, IFC has relied primarily on second-run content since its inception, but the years leading up to the rebrand in 2010 featured a surge in syndicated *television* programming—*Freaks and Geeks*, *Kids in the Hall*, *Arrested Development*—all of which were framed by the channel as underappreciated cult shows and heavily promoted as precisely the kind of “compatible reruns” Turow describes. *Portlandia* certainly qualifies as the signature program of the rebrand, a topic I address more directly in chapter three, though IFC’s signature genre quickly became the half-hour scripted comedy.

In addition to the signature program, television networks and cable channels are able to convey their desired brand identities across both original and syndicated via the

channel's distinctive visual style and aggressive promotional hooks. Megan Mullen observes that the commonly used promotional techniques like bumpers and ID spots serve to exert the cable network's brand identity over syndicated content by weaving second-run shows more seamlessly into the schedule. "Framing," Mullen says,

not only interpolates or hails desirable audiences, it can be used to assert a narrowcast identity that might not be apparent from the program selection. It also can obscure an undesirable public image. It can invite a particular reading strategy such as nostalgia or camp irony. Above all, it can breathe new life into overused, overly familiar reruns and movies (*The Rise of Cable Programming in the United States* 165).

Together with off-screen content like press releases and print advertisements, these strips of television content constitute what Jonathan Gray identifies as paratexts—the materials that exist outside of but in relation to the traditional television text that is the program itself. In his book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, Gray argues that these materials are both distinct from the texts they serve and intrinsically bound up in them, arguing that paratexts have the power to “create an authority figure, surround the text with aura, and insist on its uniqueness, value and authenticity” (82). Gray differentiates *entryway paratexts*—those that the viewer encounters before his or her engagement with the text—and *in media res paratexts*—which appear during or after the text is viewed (23). Since the majority of IFC's pre-rebrand content was not original to the channel (films and second-run television shows), I find it useful to rely on a comparison of pre- and post-rebrand paratexts rather than the texts themselves. This is because most of these paratexts are generated by IFC itself, whereas

the texts making up the channel's pre-rebrand programming were programmed rather than produced. The paratextual elements of IFC's rebrand—the redesigned logo, promo spots, network IDs, and bumpers—are a key site of the network's refashioned discourse, particularly for the de-emphasis of film as the network's primary “indie” cultural product. Indeed these paratexts comprise a much more cohesive brand identity than those that predate the rebrand, as I will discuss in chapter two. It is worth noting that there have been numerous case studies of individual cable networks' branding strategies, though little of this work has explicitly dealt with film channels like IFC. Nevertheless, Sarah Banet-Weiser's research on Nickelodeon's brand-building strategies, Andrew Goodwin's study of the early years of MTV, the work of Leverette, et al. on the evolution of HBO's brand, and Sarah Murray's recent work on The Cooking Channel all provide useful models for this project's examination of the IFC rebrand.

Niche Cable Genealogies: Rebranding Film Channels Before IFC

In the introduction to *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*, an anthology on the premium cable giant that he co-edited with Brian L. Ott and Cara Louisa Buckley, Marc Leverette notes the extensive reach of the so-called “HBO effect” and describes the efforts of other cable channels and even network television to reproduce the success of HBO's original programming and challenge its claim as the primary producer of quality television:

Cable channels such as FX, with shows like *The Shield* and *Nip/Tuck*, AMC with a series like *Mad Men*, and Showtime, with *The L Word*, *Californication*, *Dexter*, *Weeds*,

and *Queer as Folk*, have seemingly stolen a page from the HBO playbook, as well as networks like ABC with *Desperate Housewives* and *Lost*, Fox with *24* and *Arrested Development*, and NBC with *The Office* and *My Name is Earl*, have all brought the HBO “quality” formula to mainstream audiences (Leverette 1).

Launched in 1972 as one of the first non-terrestrial cable channels, Home Box Office initially began as a subscription television service that primarily aired uncut films and sports events, with a small selection of original content like sketch-variety show *Standing Room Only* (1976) and NFL highlights series *Inside the NFL* (1977-2008). HBO began producing original series at a greater rate during the late 1980s and early to mid-1990s, with cult comedy shows—*The Kids in the Hall* (1989-1995), *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998), *Mr. Show* (1995-1998)—and documentary series like *Real Sex* (1992-2009) and *Taxicab Confessions* (1995-2006). During the late nineties, however, HBO underwent a dramatic rebrand that was characterized by a new dedication to original programming in the tradition of “quality” television; this is when the cable channel premiered its well-known slogan, “It’s not TV. It’s HBO.” According to Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, this period was marked by an expanding and overcrowded cable marketplace, prompting subscription-based HBO to invest in innovative original programming in order to keep and attract subscribers. “As the marketplace became more competitive, we had to go from being an occasional-use medium to something people use on a regular basis in order for people to justify paying for us,” HBO’s President of Original Programming Chris Albrecht told *Variety* in 2002. “Original programming became a tool for doing that” (Grego A2). McCabe and Akass mark the beginning of HBO’s rebranded programming in 1997 with the premiere of prison drama *Oz* (1997-2003) and reaching

maturity in 1999 with the debut of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), a huge ratings and critical success for the cable channel (McCabe and Akass 83). Other series McCabe and Akass include in their inventory of HBO's "stable of high-performance originals" are *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), *Deadwood* (2004-2006), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-2011), and *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) (84).

In addition to providing context for IFC's 2010 rebrand, HBO is also helpful in understanding the expansion of IFC Entertainment. In addition to the flagship HBO channel, the company offers up to thirteen multiplex channels to its subscribers, including HBO2, a secondary channel that airs the same movies and series that appear on HBO; HBO Comedy, dedicated to comedy films, original comedy series, and stand-up specials; HBO Family, which airs movies and series appropriate for children; HBO Latino, a Spanish language simulcast of the primary channel; HBO Signature, dedicated to "high quality" films and original HBO series; and HBO Zone, which is marketed to the 18-34 audience demographic and airs soft-core adult programming in the late-night hours. The cable channel also has its own production company, HBO Films (formerly HBO Pictures), which produces feature films—*Behind the Candelabra* (2013), *Game Change* (2012)—, and miniseries—*Angels in America* (2003), *Band of Brothers* (2001)—generally for its own premium cable market, although a small number of its films have been theatrically released through Picturehouse, a production and distribution company HBO owned jointly with New Line Cinema until it was shut down by parent company Warner

Bros. in 2008 (Zeitchik).¹ HBO also produces and distributes documentaries through its distribution division HBO Documentary Films, including *GasLand* (2010) and *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present* (2012). In this way, HBO has served as a predecessor to IFC not only in its cable rebranding and programming strategies but in its expansion into film production and distribution.

While HBO's efforts to place original programming at the center of the premium cable channel's brand identity undoubtedly laid the groundwork for the IFC rebrand in 2010, IFC's direct corporate ancestor, Bravo, and its current parent cable channel, AMC, also underwent major rebrands in the years preceding IFC's. Launched by Cablevision, the cable company created by HBO-founder Charles Dolan following his departure from HBO in 1973, Bravo premiered in late December 1980, airing two nights a week as a pay cable channel that shared its channel space with a soft-core porn channel called Escapade (Becker). Bravo was initially dedicated exclusively to the performing arts. In a 2006 *Broadcasting & Cable* profile on the cable channel, Anne Becker wrote that during Bravo's early years on air, "typical programming included a documentary on folk group the Weavers, a symphonic tribute to composer Aaron Copland, and a performance of *The Greek Passion* by the Indiana University Opera Theater" (Becker). Airing theater, opera, ballet, and classical music performances was an expensive endeavor for a pay cable channel, however, and required corporate sponsorship in addition to subscriber

¹ Picturehouse was relaunched in January 2013 by Bob Berney, a founding executive of the company, and his wife Jeanne Berney. Though the new Picturehouse is independent from TimeWarner, at the time of this writing Berney had established a multiyear output deal with Netflix and a first-look deal with Warner Bros. Pictures International. Prior to launching Picturehouse with the backing of HBO and New Line in 2005, Berney was an executive for IFC Films, IFC Entertainment's distribution

fees; companies like Texaco, Kodak, and Mercedes-Benz sponsored Bravo's arts programming in a relationship that mirrored the underwriting system employed by public radio and television (Mullen, "Bravo" 309). In order to offset the costs of its performing arts programs, Bravo began incorporating foreign and independent films into its schedule, and by the mid-1990s the channel's programming was evenly split between arts and film (Mullen, "Bravo" 309). With the increased presence of film in its programming lineup, Bravo also began developing original television programs that discussed and reviewed films, including *Inside the Actors Studio* (1994-), *Champlin on Film* (1989-1999) and *Bravo Profiles* (1994-) (309). After launching IFC in 1994, Bravo began to gradually scale back its film programming in order to air reruns of off-network dramas like *Max Headroom* (1987-1988), *Twin Peaks* (1989-1991), *thirtysomething* (1987-1991), *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988), and *Moonlighting* (1985-1989) ("Bravo" 310). The programming strategy was closely mirrored by IFC's purchase of syndicated cult comedies in the years before the 2010 rebrand.

The most important development in Bravo's history took place after Cablevision sold the channel to NBC (now NBCUniversal) in November 2002. NBC sought to rebrand Bravo with more irreverent original programming, and a task that fell upon Bravo's Vice President of programming, Frances Berwick, and NBC's head of alternative series, Jeff Gaspin. The pair greenlighted the reality series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007), a huge ratings success and pop culture phenomenon, and *Project Runway* (2004-) (Becker). Both series laid the groundwork for Bravo's LGBT-friendly reputation

and emphasis on celebrity- and fashion-oriented reality programming that has come to form the core of the channel's brand identity. A far cry from its original arts, culture, and film programming lineup, Bravo now only airs movies two or three times a week during late-night hours—a perusal of the July 2013 schedule turned up mostly romantic comedies like *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003) and *Sex and the City* (2008). Bravo's schedule is now made up almost entirely of its successful *Real Housewives* and *Top Chef* franchises, as well as a slate of reality shows dedicated to real estate and interior design—*Property Envy* (2013-), *Million Dollar Listing* (2006-), and *Interior Therapy* (2012-). There are so many reality shows on Bravo that the channel has a talk show, *Watch What Happens: Live* (2009-), dedicated exclusively to discussing, recapping, and promoting its other programs. The evolution of Bravo's brand identity and the cable channel's programming shift away from film toward syndicated television programming and then to original programming certainly informed IFC's trajectory before and after its rebrand, though Bravo's signature programming style is hour-long reality shows rather than the scripted half-hour comedies favored by IFC. Another key similarity between the two channels is the point at which each began to downgrade independent film from the core of its brand identity—when it launched or acquired a sibling film channel. For Bravo, this happened after it launched spin-off channel IFC in 1994, and for IFC, this happened shortly after acquiring Sundance Channel in 2008.

Perhaps the cable-channel rebrand that most directly influenced the 2010 IFC rebrand, however, is AMC, IFC's former sibling and now parent channel. AMC debuted

on the air on October 1, 1984 as American Movie Classics, a premium cable channel dedicated to airing commercial-free, uncut, and un-colored films that mostly predated the 1950s. The programming of AMC's early years is well summarized by a professed diehard fan of the movie channel, who was quoted in a 1991 *New York Times* profile published just months after the channel began airing twenty-four hours a day:

It's more than nostalgia. It's a chance to see black-and-white films which may somehow have slipped through the cracks. It's wall-to-wall movies with no commercials, no aggressive graphics, no pushy sound, no sensory MTV overload, no time frame. There's a sedate pace, a pseudo-PBS quality about AMC. It's the 'Masterpiece Theater' of movies (Alexander).

In 1993, the cable channel began partnering with The Film Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to film preservation, to present an annual Film Preservation Festival, a multi-day marathon of rare or previously lost films and documentaries about the restoration and archival processes. The chief curator of film and video at the Museum of Modern Art dubbed AMC's festival "the most important public event in support of film preservation," and by 2002 the cable channel had raised over \$2 million for The Film Foundation (Van Gelder; Elber).

By the mid-nineties, AMC had garnered a dedicated and sizeable following—reaching 54-million households to rival cable channel Turner Classic Movies' 3 million at the time (Mifflin). AMC's revenues came entirely from cable subscriptions until 1998, when it finally moved to a sponsorship model and aired commercials between movies (Forkan). In September 2002, the channel changed its format to include movies from all eras, a shift that necessitated a name change from American Movie Classics to simply

AMC. Eventually, newer films aired in primetime while older films were pushed to morning and late-night time slots. After producing a smattering of unsuccessful documentary and reality series—*Backstory* (2000-2005), *FilmFakers* (2004)—AMC launched its first original scripted drama series, *Mad Men*, in 2007. The series was created by *Sopranos* writer and producer Matthew Weiner—in fact, Weiner earned his *Sopranos* gig on the strength of the *Mad Men* pilot script—and had been rejected by both HBO and Showtime before being picked up by AMC (Witchel). The show's critical and popular success was an unexpected windfall for AMC, and placed the basic-cable channel in competition with premium channels. The success of *Mad Men* prompted AMC to produce a slate of scripted dramas, including *Breaking Bad* (2008-), *The Walking Dead* (2010-), and *The Killing* (2011-). The original series lineup became such a boon for AMC's reputation with viewers, advertisers, and critics that in July 2011 its parent company, Rainbow Media, was renamed AMC Networks and spun off from its majority owner, Cablevision. AMC Networks currently owns AMC, IFC, WE tv, and the Sundance Channel, as well as IFC Films and its subsidiary labels (James).

With *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* taking off just a few years before the launch of IFC's rebrand, it is likely that the changes at AMC served as a preliminary model for the IFC rebrand. Like AMC, IFC changed its name from Independent Film Channel to simply IFC, deemphasizing films in general and specialty films in particular—classics in the case of AMC and independents in the case of IFC. IFC also followed AMC's general trajectory of changing revenue sources, first from cable subscriber fees then from

sponsors underwriting a block of programming and finally from traditional advertisers buying ad time during specific programs, necessitating the gradual incorporation of commercial interruptions into both channels' schedules. Finally, like AMC, IFC came to rely on original programming to replace films as the core of its brand identity, and each channel followed the lead of its most successful series (i.e. AMC building its identity on hour-long dramas after the success of *Mad Men* and IFC sticking to half-hour scripted comedies following the success of *Portlandia*).

Theoretical Considerations and Methodology

Building upon the existent scholarship on post-network television, cable channel branding strategies, and American independent cinema, I also rely on theoretical perspectives borrowed from three categories—Foucauldian discourse analysis, Bourdieuan theories of taste and distinction, and feminist television theory. Each of these is more fully articulated as it is deployed in the following three chapters. First, the primary site of analysis for this project, the discourses around independent-ness and indieness put forth by IFC before and after the rebrand, is greatly informed by Foucault's notion that discourse the process of maintaining power through knowledge. As John Fiske writes in *Media Matters*,

[discourse] is language in social use; language accented with its history of domination, subordination, and resistance; language marked by the social conditions of its use and its users; it is politicized, power-bearing language employed to extend or defend the interests of its discursive community... Discourse can never be abstracted from the conditions of its production and circulation in the way that language can (3).

Discourse analysis, then, helps reveal systems of power relations and institutionalized knowledge. In the case of this project, I am to use this theory of discourse and the methodology of discourse analysis to understand how IFC constructs indieness and how it constructs its audience, for whom, and to what end.

A key aspect of IFC's promotional and corporate discourse is the notion that "indieness" applies to a subcultural group and niche audience demographic for whom "indie" cultural products represent an alternative to mainstream media consumption as well as a marker of distinctive taste. Because the discourse of IFC's rebrand directly appeals to the distinctive taste of its target demographic and frames the films, television series, and other media products that constitute IFC's programming as working against or outside the "mainstream," Bourdieu's theories of taste and distinction inform my analysis of independent film and music culture in chapter one.

Bourdieu argues the consumption of works of art represents an act of communication, in which the deciphering or decoding of meaning depends upon mastery of the code itself. Interacting with and appreciating a work of art, then, does not involve innate appreciation, understanding, or taste, but rather relies upon the acquisition of the appropriate "cultural code" with which to approach it (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 3). The acquisition and accumulation of cultural capital often occurs with little to no deliberate effort on the part of the individual, and, unlike economic capital, it cannot be directly distributed across generations. Because of these factors, Bourdieu argues, the transmission of cultural capital is often invisible and is thus easily mistaken for

“legitimate competence” and attributed to individual taste (“The Forms of Capital”). Furthermore, the value of cultural capital in a class-divided society depends upon how accessible (or inaccessible) that capital is to all members of society. The premium is placed upon the perception of innateness, and any missteps reveal the process of acquisition and devalue the capital as inauthentic. These particular features of cultural capital, the invisibility of acquisition and the assumption that taste is part of individual identity, are especially important to the business of this project. For example, the advertisements for IFC’s post-rebrand makeover clearly position the channel’s audience within a select group of those who “get it,” who appreciate film and other media products that are underappreciated or misunderstood by the majority of television viewers, constructing the IFC audience as members of the same taste culture. Dick Hebdige’s work on subculture and identity is also relevant here, particularly his understanding of the power of “the media” at large—he mentions the press, film and television specifically—to define social categories, providing its viewers with images and ideological discourses assigned to other groups as well as their own (85). As commodities, media products seem well designed to establish taste cultures and the communities that form around them—film scholar Janet Harbord singles out film as a medium that is particularly well suited for this because, in the case of film, the act of consumption is not the acquisition of an art object but the more communal experience of viewing (Harbord 89).

In my investigation of IFC's construction of its audience in chapter three, I attempt to weave together—though not necessarily in equal measure—the various threads of feminist media studies as proposed by Charlotte Brunsdon and amended by Laura Stempel Mumford: industrial studies, which Brunsdon calls “the real world of women working in television”; content analysis of women who appear on television; textual analysis, both of programming addressed to women and that which feature women as central protagonists; audience studies; and the discourses around television (Brunsdon 52-55; Mumford 117). Although my principal site of analysis is the discourse concerning IFC's brand identity and, to a lesser extent, the gendering of its target audience, this project is informed by all of the aforementioned areas of feminist television scholarship. From a feminist perspective on television industry, I examine the female television executive, Jennifer Caserta, who spearheaded the IFC rebrand and also claims responsibility for much of the network's sexist marketing campaigns and language, as well as the presence (or lack thereof) of female writers, producers, and actors in IFC's original programming. Finally, I also consider whether the commodity audience that IFC's marketing team has constructed is an accurate representation of the network's actual viewing audience. Although I do not conduct substantial independent research on reception due to constraints of time and budget, I do utilize IFC's self-reported data regarding the demographics of its audience.

In short, I examine the discourses surrounding IFC's brand identity as circulated within trades, press releases, magazine interviews with IFC executives, internal branding

material, and promotional material for prospective advertisers. I also incorporate content analysis of the network's original series, general programming lineup, and promotional spots, as well as very preliminary content and textual analysis of *Portlandia* and its acknowledgment of progressive gender politics.

Using a comparative analysis of trade and popular press coverage of IFC's launch in 1994 and rebrand in 2010, as well as advertisements and industry materials like upfront literature and corporate brand guides created after the rebrand, this paper will examine the motivations for the network's emphasis on original television series and its effort to define indieness as "a perspective" that has "transcended film." Publications will include *Variety*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Advertising Age* and others, and they will be used to analyze the language used by Bravo and IFC executives in interviews as well as for general research on the channel. As for industrial literature, the most important sources will include entries from the design portfolio of Feel Good Anyway (FGA), the Portland-based graphic design firm that handled the new visual profile for the IFC rebrand; video presentations and printed materials intended to be shown to prospective advertisers during IFC's upfronts, the annual event in which a network presents the programming lineup for the upcoming season in an effort to attract advertisers and what Amanda Lotz describes as the only television promotional site at which the audience as commodity becomes visible ("Upfront Presentations" 4-5); and *The IFC Brand Book and Style Guide*, an in-house publication intended "to help everyone execute the IFC brand in the same way" (2).

Although this project will largely center on the discourse circulated by IFC within official in-house publications and in the press, I also include a bit of textual analysis of two 60-second on-air promotional spots—one created before the rebrand in the mid-2000s and one created as part of the rebrand efforts in 2010—as well as IFC’s original comedy series *Portlandia* in order to determine how these discourses of indieness play out at the textual level within IFC’s programming.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one reviews scholarship on discourses of independent film and, to a lesser extent, independent music, in order to contextualize the ways in which IFC engaged in these popular and critical discourses when it was truly a film channel. This allows me to illustrate the major changes in the brand identity and overall mission of the cable channel following the 2010 rebrand. I provide a brief overview of the historical development of discourses of independent film and music, which offer context for the discourses of independence drawn upon by IFC around the time of the channel’s launch in the mid-1990s and through the 2000s, when IFC Entertainment’s distribution subsidiary, IFC Films, became a successful operation. This section establishes the original centrality of perceptions of independence forged by 1980s and 1990s film industry developments, to both IFC’s brand identity and the network’s programming schedule. This will demonstrate the changes of the 2010 rebrand to be a significant departure from IFC’s initial discourse regarding independence.

Chapter two examines the specific changes made by the rebrand campaign, including 1) a redesigned logo and tagline, (2) a transition to ad-supported programming, (3) a reliance on original scripted comedy series, (4) an emphasis on “blockbuster” rather than lesser-known or more experimental independent films, and, (5) most important, a promotion of the multimedia products of “indie culture” and de-emphasis of independent film as the core of the brand. I use IFC’s promotional materials (on-air commercials that describe the rebrand as well as material produced for advertisers) and an internal document for IFC employees called the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide*, which explains the corporate identity, language, and audience sought by the channel post-rebrand. I review the strategies contained within the rebrand and how they were executed via various discursive practices: corporate discourses (company publications), public and promotional discourses (advertisements and programming), and industry discourses (materials for prospective advertisers, trade press coverage). Together, these sources point to a shift in the brand identity of IFC, one that moves away from identifying “independent film” as a an organized movement, and in fact away from film altogether, in favor of supporting a broad array of “indie” cultural products.

Chapter three considers IFC’s post-rebrand financial imperative of identifying and addressing a niche audience that will also be attractive to prospective advertisers. In this chapter, I describe how IFC has self-reported an audience that conveniently matches the traditional commodity audience—which is young, white, affluent, and male—in order to attract advertiser support. The channel has also placed itself in direct

competition with other niche cable channels that make similar claims about *their* viewership, and IFC's decision to rely on original half-hour comedy series and its aggressively gendered post-rebrand marketing can both be viewed as part of this competitive strategy. I take a close look at the most critically and commercially popular product of IFC's rebrand: the original scripted comedy series *Portlandia*. A sketch comedy show created by *SNL* comedian Fred Armisen and indie-rock musician Carrie Brownstein, *Portlandia* satirizes many of the same facets of "indie" culture that IFC has sought to fold into its post-rebrand programming and marketing strategies. *Portlandia* is IFC's most successful show with audiences and critics alike and is frequently used as the "face" of the new IFC in materials designed to attract advertisers. For this reason, and because the show directly confronts the markers of "indieness," *Portlandia* will provide a fitting site to examine how IFC's shifted rhetoric regarding independence is incorporated textually in its original television series.

Finally, this project concludes with a consideration of the IFC rebrand as symptomatic of the niche cable channels following the HBO rebrand of the late 1990s to pursue original scripted programming as a means to attract prestige and exert greater control over a network's corporate identity. This section also addresses the increasing murkiness of the American independent film movement since the 2000s, as well as the difficult nature of determining independent status given the complex corporate relationships of conglomerate media companies. I argue that these issues have created space for IFC to formulate its own definition of independence.

Chapter One

Defining Independence: The Discursive Evolution of *Indie*

Defining the term *independent* has proven to be quite difficult for film scholars and critics alike, and determining whether or not a film deserves the label involves an ever-shifting set of criteria. Part of this difficulty stems from two differing metrics of independent-ness: one which measures the circumstances of a film's production and one which considers a film's stylistic features, including narrative, formal-aesthetic, or textual elements. These two qualities are frequently bound together in discourses around American independent cinema. For example, in the introduction to his book *Cinema of Outsiders*, Emmanuel Levy writes that, "ideally an indie is a low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that express the filmmaker's personal vision" (2). While a discussion of an independent film in "ideal" terms is neither productive nor relevant to the purposes of this project, Levy's statement serves as useful shorthand for the prevailing popular discourse that continues to surround independent film, in part because it reflects the assumption that independent production and artistic integrity are linked. In reality, independent production practices and independent style rarely align in a tidy way, and a definition that privileges one over the other will likely exclude many films from the designation *independent*.

Perhaps another complication in arriving at a standard definition arises from the fact that independent-ness is a relational concept implying *freedom from* another entity.

From an economic or industrial perspective, the organizations against which the independent filmmaker struggles are the major studios (or, more currently, the conglomerate-owned studios and their subsidiaries). From a formal perspective, independent films employ a visual or narrative style that violates the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. In either case, independent is at odds with a sense of the mainstream, meaning independent film could not exist as a discursive category without the historical dominance of the major studios and their contemporary media-conglomerate counterparts. The prevailing understanding of independent film, then, is constantly in flux in both popular and industrial discourses because the term independent is in conversation with the mainstream of an industry that is itself in constant flux, with corporate mergers and acquisitions and constantly redrawing the boundaries between studio and independent productions. It is important to note that some scholars have challenged the binary of mainstream and alternative media that permeates much of the discourse surrounding independent film and music, and I address the issue later in this chapter.

As anthropologist Wendy Furnow writes in her book on the British indie music scene, *Empire of Dirt*,

Although indie has no exact definition, the discourses and practices around the multiple descriptions and definitions of indie detail a set of principles that reveal the values and issues at stake for the community... [and] the boundaries between what constitutes and excludes membership (25-26).

The executives behind IFC's network rebrand campaign seized upon the instability of the term *independent* in order to create a definition that is easier for the channel to control—one that is flexible and evocative of a broad “alternative” culture that minimizes independent films altogether—and this is indicative of a change in the values and objectives of the cable channel. In order to understand the discursive history of independent film to which IFC's rebrand campaign belongs and refers to, it is necessary to first review the work of other scholars whose suggestions for defining and describing independent film have influenced this project.

Perspectives on Independent-ness

Thomas Schatz divides independent film production among three classes of producer: major studios, conglomerate-owned indie divisions, and genuine independents. The film output from these different production sources is typically discursively differentiated on the basis of style (the dominant narrative, technical and formal-aesthetic norms of a given period and the corresponding innovations of or breaks with style), authorship (who produced an individual film), and mode of production (the “machinery” of the film industry) (Schatz 46). Taking into account only the films that are produced outside the domain of the media conglomerates—those made by what Schatz terms the genuine independents—it is clear that independent filmmaking is hardly a minority practice. Such productions now account for the majority of American films completed and theatrically released each year, though they reap a pitifully small portion of box-office

revenues. Although the available data on independently produced film releases is limited because the MPAA does not closely document data for non-member companies, MPAA annual reports indicate that, together, the hundreds of independents theatrically released each year typically earn less than 5 percent of domestic box-office receipts. That figure represents only the minority of independently produced films that make it to the theatrical market; hundreds of the independent films produced annually will never secure theatrical distribution (48). In 2012, non-MPAA-affiliated independents collectively released 549 films, more than four times the total film output of the major studios (“Theatrical Market Statistics 2012,” MPAA). This figure represents a dramatic increase over the independent output of 2011, and over twice the number of independent releases ten years earlier. Despite releasing less than a quarter of the year’s films, MPAA-member companies—the studios and subsidiaries of the “Big Six” media conglomerates—generated over 83 percent of domestic box-office revenues. Additionally, the approximately 17-percent market share held by independents includes two of the highest grossing films of 2012, *Twilight: Breaking Dawn Part 2* and *The Hunger Games*, both of which were produced by Lionsgate (“Studio Market Share: 2012,” Box Office Mojo). Without Lionsgate, independents’ market share of the 2012 domestic box office shrinks to around 8 percent.

Films Released Annually – Domestic Box Office

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
MPAA Members ²	205	180	179	194	204	189	168	158	141	141	128
Non-Members	270	275	310	313	390	422	470	400	428	469	549

Data collected by Rentrak Corporation and published in MPAA's Theatrical Market Statistics, 2011 and 2012.

[Table 1.1]

The existence of so-called major independents like Lionsgate is an apt reminder of the tension between style and mode of production in a discussion of what constitutes an independent film. Yannis Tzioumakis writes that, from the standpoint of production, “any film that has not been financed, produced or distributed by a major entertainment conglomerate” can be considered independent—regardless of budget or aesthetic and narrative features (2). Media industries scholar Alisa Perren elaborates on this perspective in her book *Indie, Inc.*, in which she identifies the most common areas of assessment as the source of a film’s financing; the corporate affiliations of the film’s distributor; the sites of the film’s exhibition; the outsider status of the film’s talent in Hollywood; and what she calls the “‘spirit’ of the film,” which she says usually refers to “its aesthetic or generic ties to commercial or alternative media traditions” (8). Under

² According to the MPAA, members include the following six studios and their subsidiaries: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, Paramount Pictures Corporation, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Inc. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, Universal City Studios LLC, and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.

such a definition, the ranks of independent features include big-budget franchise films like the aforementioned *Twilight* and *Hunger Games* series.

Taking an aesthetic tack, Janet Staiger argues for approaching American independent film as a film practice with a set of shared formal conventions. According to Staiger, the conventions of independent film include “dialogue for purposes other than advancement of the plot”; “‘quirky’ or odd characters”; narrative ambiguity and intertextuality; and emphasis on verisimilitude (23). Together, these conventions encourage and expect viewers to “seek *an emotional and, for the most part, intellectual engagement* with the film” (emphasis original, 23). Similarly, Michael Z. Newman’s work on American independent film also focuses primarily on reception. Newman conceives of independent as a taste culture encompassing many forms of media (*Indie: An American Film Culture* 18), and conceives of independent cinema as a film culture composed of “not only movies but also institutions—distributors, exhibitors, festivals, and critical media—within which movies are circulated and experiences, and wherein an indie community shares expectations about their forms and meanings” (“Indie Culture” 1).

As this project is primarily concerned with how IFC identifies and defines terms like independent and “indie” in its branding efforts, programming, and promotional strategies. With this in mind, I rely most heavily on Newman’s concept of indie film culture. This notion is not bound to a strict definition of independent film on the basis of the size of a film’s budget; the position of a film’s producer, director, distributor or financer relative to the Hollywood establishment; or even a film’s textual features.

Instead of viewing “indieness” as an economic category, narrative strategy, or aesthetic paradigm, Newman argues that indieness is first and foremost a discursive practice, the “product of a judgment that we make about the film, or which comes premade for us as part of the film’s promotional discourse and its contexts of consumption” (*Indie: An American Film Culture* 11-12). The most useful way to assess “indieness,” then, is not to create a classification system but to identify which media products are discursively designated as “indie” or “independent,” by whom, and why. While Newman acknowledges the profitmaking potential for the promotion of indie films as a source of distinction among niche audiences, he dismisses the notion that the discourse of independent-ness is merely a marketing strategy (*Indie* 21-22). I argue, however, that marketing considerations are the primary rationale for IFC’s post-rebrand re-designation of the term *indie* to refer to a lifestyle or taste preference rather than a film culture. Additionally, *indie* seems to be much more evocative of a particular aesthetic and taste culture that encompasses many forms of media and DIY culture, but seems to be particularly linked to indie music culture. Although the independent film movement closely paralleled the development of the independent music scene in the 1980s and 90s, the term “indie” as a differentiation from independent seems to have emerged earlier among music producers, critics, and fans.

Also helpful to this project is Geoff King’s work on “Indiewood,” which he describes as a category of film that coalesced in the mid-nineties and is characterized by a marriage of mainstream filmmaking conventions and the markers of distinction offered

by alternative forms. Among the titles King identifies as examples of Indiewood films are *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *American Beauty* (1999) , and *Traffic* (2000). According to King, these opposing elements of the mainstream and the alternative can appear in different proportions within different Indiewood films, creating a spectrum of indieness. Films that fit this description can be more or less conventional but ultimately refer to a middlebrow product that is typically accessible to a much wider audience than the average art house film (*Indiewood USA* 17-22). King argues that as a category of specialty films, the characteristics associated with Indiewood products function as niche marketing tools, appealing to the tastes of a specific target audience with an invested interest in being “cool” (*Indiewood* 12-15). Newman also considers the complications presented by commercially successful independent films, noting that

The ‘indie blockbuster,’ so crucial to the development of the mini-majors in the 1990s and 2000s, aims to bargain away some outsider credibility in exchange for commercial reward, calculatingly nudging some indie films toward the mainstream to occupy negotiated terrain, part outside and part inside. (*Indie* 5).

It is this terrain that IFC has increasingly sought to occupy after enacting its rebrand. Whether this marriage of the conventional and the unconventional is labeled “Indiewood” or “blockbuster independents,” the term favored by IFC, it is apparent that since the 2010 rebrand the network has offered more palatable, middlebrow content in its aggressive appeal to a wider demographic (Weisman).

Indie vs. Independent

In a discussion of IFC's branding strategy, it is worth noting that several of these authors use "indie" to differentiate textual features from corporate affiliations, or to describe a larger cultural movement that may or may not include anti-corporate values. In the introduction to her book on the development of Miramax, *Indie, Inc.*, Alisa Perren uses the term "indie" to describe films that are marketed as independent but born of murky corporate lineages: "A film or company will be described by me as independent if it is unaffiliated with a major media conglomerate. If a conglomerate has an investment in it, I label it an indie" (8). Newman's use of "indie" minimizes industrial relationships altogether. He notes that "'indie' has become a buzzword, a term whose meanings—alternative, hip, edgy, uncompromising—far exceed the literal designation of media products that are made independently of major firms" ("Indie Culture" 16). While Newman continues to use independent to denote individuals or companies working outside the major conglomerates, he uses "indie" to describe a taste culture that includes multiple forms of media and the social groups that circulate and consume them (16-17). The differentiation between "indie" and independent is a key part of IFC's rebranding efforts, with the cable channel preferring the broader application and less strictly industrial connotation of "indie" over independent (the use of which is explicitly discouraged by the rebrand's marketing strategy). I explore this issue in greater detail in chapters two and three.

The Discursive Genealogy of Independent Film

The aforementioned qualities of independent film were forged within a specific and relatively recent historical context—the mid- to late-1980s. Many scholars consider the first sign of an identifiable American independent film movement to be the 1989 Sundance Film Festival win of Stephen Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape*. While this particular film and the following spate of independent films of the 1990s certainly mark the beginnings of independent as a popular (rather than a trade) discourse and the resulting possibilities to capitalize on this particular discourse via marketing strategies, the discourse of independent film has existed, on an industrial level at least, since the coalescence of the Hollywood studio system in the late 1910s and early 1920s. In his work on the historiography of industrial, popular, and academic discourses around independent film, Tzioumakis identifies anti-monopoly film producers who labeled themselves “the independents” as early as the 1910s, and Newman locates the roots of a broad “indie” culture within the music-based American countercultures of the 1960s and 70s and even the jazz-fueled 1920s. Working from Tzioumakis' extensive history of the waves of independent filmmaking practices and their accompanying discursive shifts within the film industry, Geoff King observes:

The term ‘independent’ has had rather different connotations at different periods in the history of American cinema. In the 1930s, for example, it signified ‘something less than trash’. In the late 1950s and early 1960s it might have suggested both the innovations of the ‘American New Wave’ and the low-budget exploitation science fiction and horror made by Roger Corman for AIP (*American Independent Cinema* 8).

Scholars of independent film note that the qualities associated with the American independent film movement that began in the 1980s, those that inform Levy's definition of the exemplary independent film, owe a clear debt to the art films and so-called New Hollywood or Hollywood Renaissance filmmakers of the 1960s and early 1970s (Staiger 23, King 6). Tzioumakis identifies this period as "the point when American independent feature filmmaking became widely perceived as a vehicle for the articulation of alternative voices and political positions and therefore clearly different from other forms or brands, like top-rank and exploitation, of independent filmmaking" (209). This development has had a major impact on the current discourse of independent cinema. Films made during this period, which is generally regarded as the years between 1967 and 1975, blended exploitation strategies, art cinema techniques, and an alteration or disavowal of classical Hollywood components. The result was further expansion of the discourse of independent cinema, this time to include the perception that independent was synonymous with the countercultural and the anti-classical, as well as (1) a greater degree of creative freedom and control for filmmakers; (2) the use of art cinema aesthetics and filmmaking techniques³, (3) topical or controversial subject matter, often involving a frank representation of sex, drugs, and/or violence (coinciding with the

³ This particular feature reflects the influence of the New American Cinema Group, a collective of American filmmakers who formed in the late fifties with the goal of working entirely outside the existing structure of Hollywood, providing funding for the micro-budgeted films of its members (Tzioumakis 191). The filmmakers associated with this group were heavily influenced by European art cinema and favored an anti-virtuosic approach to filmmaking, valuing intuition and improvisation over what they deemed the "overprofessionalism and over-technicality" of Hollywood (Mekas 74). Though the movement only lasted from 1959 to 1963, its legacy is evident in the discourse of *independent* as ultra-low budget, anti-Hollywood art cinema.

abolishment of the production code in 1968); (4) questioning established traditions, both in filmmaking and the culture at large); and, (5) perhaps most significant, addressing and targeting films to a youth audience (170-171, 178-179). It is important to note, however, that this movement did not radically change Hollywood; the majors still controlled distribution, and, as Tzioumakis writes, “elements of a potentially new aesthetic system were assimilated gradually into the powerful classical aesthetic” (180-181).

Still, the influence of the so-called Hollywood Renaissance on would-be independent filmmakers was great. The independent cinema of the late 1970s and early 80s was characterized by films made on extremely low budgets and with complete independent-ness from the majors, often financed by government grants and public television funding. Like their predecessors in earlier waves of independent filmmaking, these films displayed markedly different aesthetics or politics from mainstream film and featuring subjects that mainstream features avoided (208). According to Tzioumakis, American independent films of the late 1970s and early 1980s provided the foundation for an identifiable independent film culture—and the discourse that would follow it—by coupling non-mainstream aesthetics with genuinely independent producers and distributors and setting themselves apart from lowbrow exploitation films. The financial success of a small number of these films, particularly John Sayles’ *Return of the Seacaucus Seven* in 1980, indicated a viable market for independent features and prompted the formation of specialty distribution companies to handle this demand. Describing the coalescence of the independent film market and culture in the

early 1980s in his book *Down and Dirty Pictures*, Peter Biskind writes, “Where before there had been a trickle of poorly funded documentaries, supplemented by the occasional flood of slick, reasonable well-produced theatrical pictures...suddenly there seemed to be an indie *movement*” (Biskind 17). The financial and critical successes of this stream of films—*My Dinner with Andre* (Malle, 1981), *Stranger than Paradise* (Jarmusch, 1984), *Blood Simple* (Joel Coen, 1984), *She’s Gotta Have it* (Spike Lee, 1986)—greatly increased the exposure of the word *independent*, cementing its place in popular discourse and linking it to a very specific type of film product (212).

Cultural Consins: Indie Music and Independent Film

Though the use of the word *independent* had long been used within the film industry to describe filmmaking practices, individuals, and companies that worked outside or against the studio system, by the 1980s *independent* denoted a distinct cultural category in the U.S. and the U.K. This is true of music as well as film. Research on the discourses of independent music closely indicates that the two mediums have followed a parallel trajectory. As with independent film, indie music of the 1980s and 90s owed a heavy debt to the “underground” music culture of the 1960s (Hibbet 56, Azerrad, 7-8). For both mediums, independent works constitute what David Hesmondalgh calls an “oppositional genre,” one that seeks to challenge and redefine the fraught relationship between creativity and commerce (35). Including independent music in this conversation is vital, because contemporary indie culture and the popular, industrial, and critical

discourses that surround it are heavily informed by independent music as well as independent film. Music plays a primary role in the form of indieness embraced by IFC in its 2010 rebrand and subsequent scripted comedy series; it is a driving force behind the ambiguity and consumer-driven nature of the channel's new definition of *independent*. Whereas independent filmmakers and actors featured heavily in IFC's on- and off-air promotional materials that predate the rebrand, indie musicians (and indie comedians) are now a key presence in the cable channel's programming and promotions. Additionally, IFC has become a major sponsor of music and stand-up comedy stages at festivals like Bonnaroo and South by Southwest (SXSW). IFC's sponsorship is especially interesting in the case of music-film-technology mega-festival SXSW; despite the substantial growth of the film portion of the festival in recent years, IFC has limited its sponsorship to small music stages and the IFC Crossroads House, which has served as the primary venue for the newly formed comedy portion of SXSW.

In the case of independent music, this tension between art and the cultural industries has perhaps a more political history than with independent film. Hesmondalgh notes that the emergence of the term "indie" in the UK during the mid-1980s was the result of a post-punk ethos—captured by indie record labels like One Little Indian, Creation, and Rough Trade—that sought to draw attention to production and challenge traditional corporate relationships between artists and major labels (35). Indie rock soon became associated with specific bands, a particular sound, etc., and the term "indie" was no longer a marker of outsider status relative to the major labels. The emergence of

“pseudo-independent” labels that were subsidiaries of larger companies—like Hut, a subsidiary of EMI/Virgin, and Dedicated, operated by BMG—complicated the definition of indie, and the relationship was made even more murky due to these corporate-owned labels using independent distribution to qualify for inclusion on indie charts (51). By the mid-1990s, according to Hesmondalgh, “The meaning of this aesthetic had changed radically...and had lost much of its oppositional edge. Indie was a term now generally used to describe a set of sounds and an attitude, rather than an aesthetic and institutional position” (51).

For film and music alike, the label *independent* quickly became complicated by the multiple industrial channels through which a film or an album had to pass in order to reach its audience. An independently produced album might still rely on a major distributor, for example, and the advent of indie imprints of larger corporations further complicated the designation of *independent*. With such a complicated corporate lineage, it seemed that the primary unifying factor across different artists was a similar aesthetic, sound, attitude, etc. For film, the term *independent* continues to connote a particular constellation of traits, however complicated or compromised they might be in reality—a low budget, an “auteur” motivated by expressing his/her artistic vision rather than by profit, unusual or innovative subject matter and/or visual style. By contrast, indie music (which more or less means indie *rock*) seems to connote a much more specific taste culture and aesthetic. Michael Newman correctly points out that independent film and independent music often share a consumer base, though I would argue that indie music

has a stronger claim to “cool”—a more defined culture in terms of clothing, lifestyle, etc. Perhaps this has to do with the far greater number of easily consumable independent music products when compared to films. Though a huge number of independent films are produced annually, the difficulty in attaining distribution prevents the kind of widespread accessibility that music enjoys. Additionally, high-quality music recordings are generally cheaper and easier to self-produce, release, and distribute than a feature-length indie film—though the film industry has gradually opened to more opportunities for independent financing via crowdsourcing websites like Kickstarter, online downloads and distribution platforms, etc. Still, small-scale independent music production has historically been and continues to be more easily produced and more widely accessible than independent films.

It is important to note that, within the discourses around independent and alternative cultural production, the circumstances of production and ideals like innovation and artistic integrity are inextricably linked, the result of what Hesmondalgh calls the “mystification of artistic production” and the myth of the “isolated genius” who operates outside of corporate structures and without commercial imperatives (35). As I argue later in this project, this mythology is partly responsible for the murky discursive space surrounding labels like *indie* and *independent*, causing the seemingly dichotomous art and commerce to endlessly invoke one another. In other words, the myth of the artistic genius makes it difficult to reconcile the involvement of corporate interests in the creation of a stylistically or formally innovative product. The assumption that style

denotes anti-corporate values and non-corporate circumstances of production permeates popular discourses around independent film and music, and this assumption is greatly exploited by the marketing teams of conglomerate-owned “indie” divisions.

In the decades following its 1994 as a spinoff cable channel, IFC has not only outperformed but bought out its former major film channel competitor, Sundance Channel, and has expanded into a vertically integrated independent film company. With such heavy involvement in the production, distribution, and exhibition of independent films, and with the widespread availability of VOD channels and online film distribution platforms making film channels less financially viable, it seems logical that IFC would begin to use its cable channel as an opportunity to venture into other areas of indie culture. The channel was created at a moment when Levy’s “ideal indie” had great cultural currency, and independent film discourse carried values of artistic integrity, innovative style, and anti-corporate attitudes. But the popularity of independent films created a market that demanded attention from conglomerate-owned studios, resulting in the complicated independent status of films with corporate financing or distribution—and films that were marketed as independent under a conglomerate-owned “indie” subsidiary. The instability of the label *independent* and its association with a particular audience and taste culture created an excellent opportunity for IFC to circulate its own representation of independent-ness, one that downplayed anti-corporatism and artistic sensibilities and borrowed heavily from a taste culture associated with indie music. In

the following chapter, I will examine how this definition of independent played out in IFC's promotional campaigns, programming lineup, and marketing strategies.

Chapter Two

“More Than Just Film”: Expanding Independence

In March 2010, just in time for the cable channel’s spring upfronts, IFC unveiled its rebranded corporate identity to the trade press and potential advertisers. Five key changes in the channel’s marketing and programming strategies characterized the “new” IFC: (1) a redesigned logo, tagline, and name, (2) a transition to ad-supported programming, (3) a reliance on original scripted comedy series, (4) an emphasis on “blockbuster” rather than lesser-known or more experimental independent films, and, (5) most important, a promotion of the multimedia products of “indie culture” and de-emphasis of independent film as the core of the brand.

IFC’s management, through press releases and statements made by Caserta, former IFC President Evan Shapiro, and IFC’s senior vice president of original programming, Debbie DeMontreaux, has made no secret of the marketing imperatives that drove the rebrand—all have described IFC’s audience as young, hip, affluent, and 70% male (the minority of female viewers is described in the brand book as “chicks who think like dudes”). The cable channel further divides this audience into the subgroups “Authentic Influencers” and “Responsible Rebels.” The Authentic Influencers are ages 18 to 34, creative, non-traditional, and “have a knack for discovering cool stuff, and their friends turn to them for it” (IFC 6-7). Members of this group mature into Responsible Rebels, who are ages 35 to 49, have families and 9-to-5 jobs, and respect the DIY aesthetic and lifestyle that they have traded for “grown-up” responsibilities (IFC 6-7). That IFC chose

to highlight these groups as their target demographics at the same moment that the cable channel switched to an ad-supported programming model is not coincidental; the 18-49 age group has long been the most coveted demographic for advertisers and thus for the television networks trying to woo them (Ryzik). IFC's identification of its viewers as "Authentic Influencers" and "Responsible Rebels" camouflages the fact that the cable channel is simply repackaging a desirable demographic in hopes of attracting new advertisers in its shift from sponsorship, a system in which advertisers sponsor programming blocks but not specific shows or schedule hours, to ad-supported financing, the more traditional model in which advertisers purchase commercial segments during specific shows and/or hours.

The changes brought about by the rebrand were enacted to streamline IFC's new brand identity in order to set the cable channel apart from its niche cable competitors and appeal to its target demographic, which, as I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, happens to be the traditional TV commodity audience. According to Caserta, market research indicated that comedy performed particularly well with the young, white, affluent male target demographic, inspiring IFC's decision to rely so heavily upon comedy series in both its original and acquired television programming (Weisman). Likely the comparatively low cost of producing comedy shows, particularly the sketch comedies that have comprised much of IFC's post-rebrand lineup, also contributed to the decision to limit the new scripted series to this genre and to the half-hour format. For example, a single episode of sister-channel AMC's signature series, *Mad Men*, costs

around \$2-2.5 million, while *Portlandia* has an estimated production budget of under \$1 million per season (Witchel; Mesh).

Always On. Slightly Off.: Rebranding the IFC Logo and Tagline

While Caserta, Sehring, and other IFC executives have been very open with the trade press about the intentions of the rebrand, additional information from industrial literature intended for prospective advertisers and IFC employees illustrates the extremely detailed reasoning behind each of the five major changes that characterized the rebrand. One such piece of evidence comes from the design portfolio of Feel Good Anyway (FGA), the Portland-based graphic design firm that created the new visual profile for the IFC rebrand. The FGA portfolio entry on IFC details the cable channel's commitment to streamlining its new brand identity and message. Previous incarnations of the logo and tagline alluded to film. The notch in the *i* of the 2001-2010 logo (Fig. 2.1), for example, suggested a film strip's sprocket holes, and the original "always, uncut" (alternately "tv, uncut.") tagline referred to the cable channel's dedication to independent film as art product—and in fact the notched *i* logo continues to be used by IFC Films, IFC Entertainment's film distribution company. The redesigned logo and tagline for the cable channel, however, neither visually nor terminologically refer to film; instead, they are imbued with an essence of the offbeat and alternative, consistent with the new IFC brand identity in which film is no longer the main component (Vit). According to the FGA portfolio:

IFC's vision for the project was to extend the channel's reach beyond indie film to include a wide selection of indie culture. Music, film, food, sex, gaming, internet shenanigans—all of these categories would be within IFC's creative domain. They placed a particular emphasis on comedy as a focal point for the new brand, and everything from the logo to promos to the show packaging had to reflect the 'Always On. Slightly Off.' sensibilities of the new IFC (Feel Good Anyway).

FGA responded to IFC's desire to imbue all promotional material with the "offbeat" sensibility of the new brand identity by visually incorporating the "Always On. Slightly Off." tagline into every iteration of the logo. Different versions featured alterations to the size and placement of the phrase in order to give a chaotic edge and irreverent, unpredictable personality to the slogan (Feel Good Anyway). The lettering of the IFC logo itself was also designed to appear "slightly off," with imperfect lines and bent angles (Fig. 2.2)

The resulting tension between a bold graphic style and a slightly rough, handcrafted DIY aesthetic is identifiably indie and is carried into IFC's promotional video segments, which were also created by FGA. An irony-heavy blend of kitschy and glossy, the channel ID spots refer to the lo-fi, videographic look of cable television of the 1980s and 90s as well as a cleaner, design-heavy contemporary aesthetic. Together, FGA's logo redesign and the new "Always on. Slightly off." tagline created by IFC (a



IFC Logo
1994 – 2001

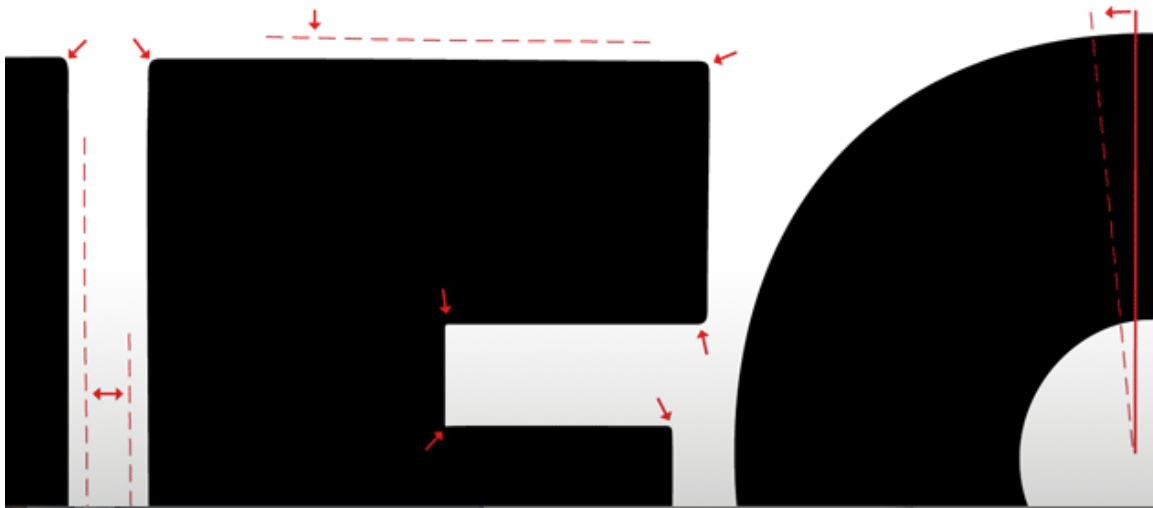


IFC Logo
2002 – 2009



Variations of the IFC Logo Designed by Feel Good Anyway
2010 - Present

[Figure 2.1]



The redesigned logo's imperfections.
[Fig. 2.2]

play on the old tagline, “Always, uncut.”) represent a shift away from specific references to independent film (the ‘uncut’ presentation of feature films, visual allusions to film strips) and toward an identification with a broad notion of a vaguely “offbeat” indie culture. The introduction to *The IFC Brand Book & Style Guide*, a publication intended for use within the company “to help everyone execute the IFC brand in the same way,” is quite clear about the rebrand’s efforts to move away from independent film while still acknowledging it as the “roots” of broader independent culture (IFC 2). In a segment contrasting IFC’s 1994 brand identity with the new, 2010 rebrand, the brand book states:

1994. We're the type of people who see an opportunity and grab it. We bring together films and filmmakers doing compelling work--- work that isn't compromised, work that is original and creative. We showcase these films, commercially uninterrupted, 24 hours a day. Hello, IFC brand.

2010. More than a decade and a half later, we're still standing-- but we're not standing still. Today, our audience demands more. And they trust us to bring them more. Today, IFC is no longer just about independent film. We are about an independent perspective-- a perspective that champions content worth watching.

(IFC 4).

"No Longer Just About Film": A New Programming Strategy

The comparison of the differences in IFC's programming from its launch to the time of its rebrand make the shift away from independent film as the center of IFC's brand identity strikingly clear. Furthermore, the assertion in the brand book that IFC "is no longer just about independent film" is consistent with the channel's framing of independent film and the nonconformist attitude of independent filmmakers as the logical antecedents of indie subculture. This progression is laid out explicitly in the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide*: "Our Indie Perspective on what's worth watching is born from the original independent-film movement and continues to evolve..." (IFC 5). Caserta has used similar language in interviews, calling IFC's original programming "an evolution from independent film" and asserting that the new series maintain an "indie perspective that has transcended film and moved over to other areas of culture, like music, comedy, gaming" (Cable Fax).

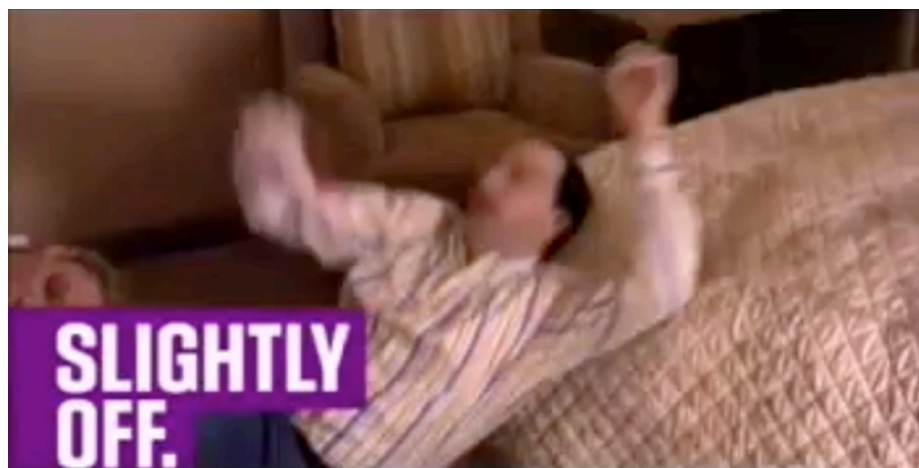
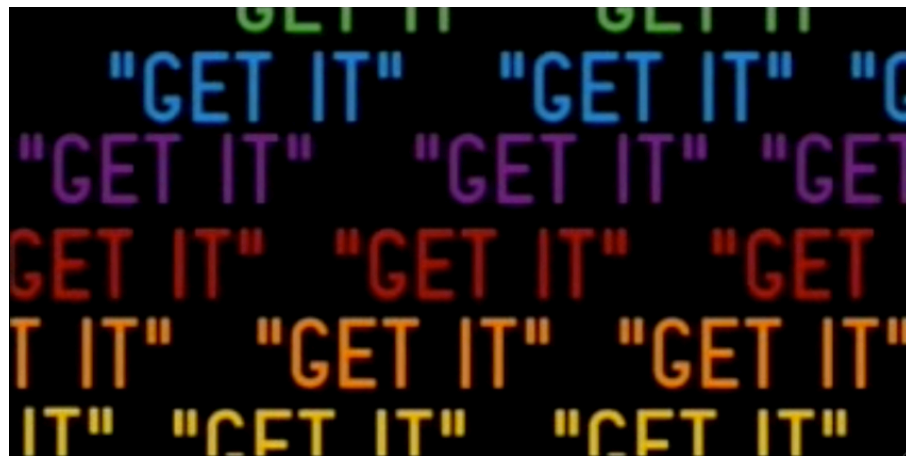
Perhaps the most comprehensive example of this rhetoric can be found in a 60-second promotional spot that aired in 2010 as part of the first wave of the rebrand and outlines the channel's new direction for viewers. The spot, which I have unofficially titled the "Get It?" promo, frames independent films of 1980s and 90s as the source of inspiration for all things quirky and rebellious about current indie subculture, and name-checks indie auteurs who launched their careers in this period ("guys like Quentin [Tarantino], Spike [Lee], Joel [Coen], and Ethan [Coen]") before praising the filmmakers as the progenitors of the values encapsulated by IFC's new brand identity: "They made off-kilter movies that were always on point." Flashing clips from independent and cult films of the eighties and nineties—*Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Barton Fink* (1991), *Platoon* (1986), *Rumble Fish* (1983), *The Road Warrior* (1981), *Evil Dead II* (1987), and *Benny and Joon* (1993)—the segment reminds the viewer of IFC's long history on the air while appealing to IFC viewers' distinctive tastes: "IFC was there, proving that it's okay to love what not everyone likes." As the spot continues, the film clips begin to include more recent films—*Garden State* (2004), *Gangs of New York* (2002)—and are interspersed with clips of music videos, game shows, and IFC's original series—*Food Party* (2009-2010), *The Whitest Kids U Know* (2007), and *Trapped in the Closet* (2005-2007)—and syndicated television programs—*Arrested Development* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*—as the voiceover proclaims that the independent film movement's alternative "point of view" now "inspires more than just indie film" (TreyPresley).

By referring to the channel's past role in the independent film movement but not its present involvement, IFC uses independent film as a way to bolster its authority in curating and presenting indie cultural products. Since IFC Entertainment, via its subsidiaries, remains heavily invested in independent films production (IFC Productions), distribution (IFC Films), and exhibition (The IFC Center), it is worth noting that the rebrand's promotional discourses and materials do not refer to the relationship IFC currently has with independent film but rather focus on how IFC's history with independent film informs its excellent taste and curatorial sensibility in regard to indie "culture" at large. To be clear, independent films are still part of IFC's programming lineup, but they are no longer the focus of the channel's brand identity and mostly serve to round out the schedule outside primetime hours so the cable channel can indeed be "always on." The channel does not strive to air new or experimental content, nor does it have a clear definition of what *independent* means beyond fitting the sensibilities of the new IFC brand identity.

An on-air promo from the mid-2000s offers an excellent contrast with the "Get It?" promo, illustrating the major differences between IFC's brand identity before and after the 2010 rebranding efforts.⁴ The untitled 60-second promo is meant to seem like a scene from an indie movie, and hardly looks like a commercial at all. It begins with a wide shot of a snowy field on a bleak winter day where a young man and woman stand in

⁴ The online content hosted by IFC is now limited to post-rebrand materials, and any promos or other video content that are easily available on YouTube have been uploaded by third-party users. This particular promo is undated and untitled, though it was uploaded to YouTube in 2007 and likely dates to a few years prior.

the distance holding hands. As sweeping music plays, the young man breaks away from the woman and toward the camera, stumbling in the snow while she cries out his name and tries to follow him. When the young man reaches the camera, he pauses for a moment and it becomes clear that he is played by Jake Gyllenhaal (an actor who was mostly known for his roles in independent films at the time). Suddenly, an off-camera voice shouts, “Cut!” Gyllenhaal looks over his shoulder, seemingly confused, as a camera operator and a sound mixer holding a boom box walk into frame. The sound mixer presses a button and the maudlin music dies. The camera follows Gyllenhaal as he paces around in the snow, frustrated, and asks the cameraman what went wrong. “It was great,” the cameraman replies, “we just gotta reset the camera.” The un-credited actress playing the young woman walks up and kisses him on the cheek. Off screen, the director shouts, “Camera resets. Actors can go back to holding.” As the camera pans across the field to a car parked along a nearby road and Gyllenhaal trudges through the snow toward it, the IFC logo and the words “The Independent Film Channel” appear on the right side of the frame (VilinaG). This promo invokes the process of filmmaking in a much different way than the “Get It?” ad of the rebrand campaign. In contrast with the lightning-fast editing and videographic look of the 2010 promo, the visual style of the earlier promo is cinematic, making it as unobtrusive as possible and putting it in line with IFC’s pre-rebrand no-commercial-interruption guarantee. Perhaps the most striking difference between these two commercials is how movies themselves are portrayed. The



Stills from the IFC "Get It?" promo (2010).
[Figure 2.3]



Stills from an untitled IFC promo featuring Jake Gyllenhaal (circa 2007).
[Figure 2.4]

earlier promo emphasizes the creative process of filmmaking, simulating an indie film shoot without commentary. The “Get It?” promo, on the other hand, presents indie films as consumer products that are indistinguishable from other indie cultural products and serve as indicators of both the viewer’s and the cable channel’s superior cultural tastes.

Another key insight the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide* offers on the rebranding strategies can be found in the section on language, which includes lists of acceptable and unacceptable words and phrases to use when describing IFC and its programming. Among the “words to lose” are *art*, *artsy*, and *avant-garde* (considered too “heady and self-important”); *fringe*, *provocative*, *uncompromising*, and *experimental* (labeled non-commercial and off-putting to advertisers); *irreverent*, *edgy*, and *cutting-edge* (words that are used by rival channels); and *independent* and *alternative* (which the channel considers too vague to use on their own). It is striking that the word *independent*, the *I* in IFC, is on the list of undesirable words. It is also worth noting that *independent* is deemed “too easily misinterpreted” to be used on its own, which is indicative of the word’s instability and imprecision which make it unsuitable for branding purposes (IFC 20). Officially sanctioned words and phrases include *indie*, *eclectic*, *authentic*, *intelligent*, *non-traditional*, *sharpcooltwisted* (*sharp* and *twisted* can be used on their own, but *cool* cannot), and the ubiquitous “Always on, slightly off.” catchphrase, which IFC employees are encouraged to “repeat often” (IFC 16-22). Although an asterisked note reminds employees, “We use these words in casual conversation, not trade/industry speak,” the prescribed language

offered by the *Brand Book & Style Guide* reappears in the majority of the materials geared toward prospective advertisers and in nearly every trade article in which an IFC executive or representative has offered a statement.

Whereas IFC had previously emphasized the role of the director as artist and framed itself as protecting the original artistic vision of a film, the fact that the brand

Words to use: *

- "always on, slightly off"
- sharpcooltwisted
- "on"
- indie perspective
- authentic
- indie eclectic
- sharp & twisted
- non-traditional fresh
- influence intelligent
- new smart clever

Words to lose:

- avant-garde
- fringe
- uncompromising
- experimental
- irreverent
- edgy cutting-edge
- independent (on its own)
- alternative (on its own)

*These are words we use in casual conversation, not trade/industry speak.

17

"Our Language: Words to Use/Words to Lose."
IFC Brand Book & Style Guide, 2010.
[Figure 2.5]

book explicitly prohibits words that may be associated with art films (*art*, *artsy*, *experimental*, *avant-garde*, etc.) indicates the channel's new preference for a certain kind of indie film, one that is decidedly more Indiewood according to King's definition. Two of the films featured in the aforementioned promotional spot, *Garden State* and Scorsese's \$97-million *Gangs of New York*, are explicitly mentioned by King as examples of various points on the Indiewood spectrum, as are some of the recent "featured movies" from IFC's schedule, including *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004) and *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) (King 11, 260, 264).

IFC originally had a close relationship with specific directors, but according to brand book, IFC "judge[s] a story on its own merit—not by whether it was told in the 'golden age' or by a gifted auteur" (IFC 11). Under the definition set by the rebrand, a cultural product's independent status (or indie status, since *independent* is a "word to lose") does not depend on its budget, its author, the period in which it was made, or the critical acclaim it has received (IFC 10-11). An indie product, according to IFC, should not be too challenging, but it "shouldn't insult the viewer's intelligence, either." For IFC, indie means offbeat, but not too "weird" or "out there." In short, IFC treats indieness as a perspective, an attitude, and above all a sensibility. Caserta has defined IFC's take on the characteristics of indieness as "unconventional stories, characters, talent, execution, and, above all, authenticity" (Benzine). Indie, then, means whatever IFC wants it to mean; it is anything that fits IFC's decidedly Indiewood, quirky-but-not-prickly post-rebrand

sensibility. This use of the term fits Newman's assertion that indieness is determined contextually by those who produce and consume indie cultural products.

That IFC prefers the term *indie* to *independent* is especially revealing in regard to the channel's definitions of indieness and the strategies behind the rebrand. According to the brand book, *indie* "refers to a vibe not a genre" (IFC 18). These loose and malleable definitions of the term mirror much of what Newman has observed about the gradual replacement of *independent* with *indie*. Citing its widespread application to all products of nonmainstream culture, Newman notes that while *indie* is often treated as a hip synonym for *independent*, the term also serves to complicate the traditional use of *independent* as a category. Newman argues that the "mystification" inherent in the word *indie* "diminishes or makes vague the significance of economic distinctions and injects added connotations of a distinguishing style or sensibility and of a social identity" (*Indie: An American Film Culture* 4). IFC's official promotion of the term *indie* over *independent* in its rebrand process, then, facilitates the channel's shift toward diversified indie content and avoids attributing indieness to budgetary limits, a particular era, or to a specific aesthetic.

Now With Commercial Interruptions: Original Scripted Programming and Advertiser Support

The increasing importance of original scripted programming to a niche channel's brand identity and, ultimately, its survival, was a key motivating factor behind IFC's rebrand in 2010. It is likely that other major considerations involved the lack of a clear

definition of independent film as well as advertiser and channel fears that an abundance of cable channels and online media platforms have created a far-too-fractured audience. As Newman and others have noted, the complicated corporate relationships produced by conglomeration and acquisition leave no suitable rubric with which to assess a film's independent status. In such a situation, it is unsurprising that IFC took advantage of the inherent slipperiness of the term *independent* and moved to create its own definition, one that championed the new corporate philosophy and programming strategy of the rebrand. Such dramatic programming, branding, and marketing changes affect other film channels as well, including AMC, The Sundance Channel, and Turner Classic Movies. If such channels find that they are more commercially successful when structuring their programming schedules around original television series, there could be major consequences for the independent film industry, a sector that is already struggling to define itself for audiences.

Chapter Three

Channeling Identities: *Portlandia* and The (Gendered) Indie Commodity Audience

As I have argued in previous chapters, a key element of the IFC rebrand was a shift in focus away from independent film as the core of the cable channel's brand identity and toward a broader indie cultural sensibility as manifested in multiple forms of media. Original scripted comedies began to replace independent films as the media product most central to IFC's brand identity, as evidenced by the overwhelming presence of these series in both promotional materials and primetime schedule hours. The financial costs of producing these new original series, however, required additional income from advertisers. As a niche cable channel, IFC would never be able to court prospective advertisers with ratings numbers alone, meaning the channel would need to convince advertisers that its niche audience is a particularly valuable one. With an audience that is ostensibly comprised of fans of indie cultural products, IFC has framed its audience members as tastemakers and trendsetters, a group that is surely desirable to advertisers that trade on the consumption of coolness. The *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide* champions the influential nature of the channel's audience: "We listened to our audience: they expect us to rescue good stuff and uncover the new stuff. We attract a desirable and passionate audience that influences the masses" (22). The measurement of audiences and the breakdown of the television audience into specific demographics have been slow to change, however, and is still mired in the model that formed in the heyday of network TV. This means that IFC represents its audience to prospective advertisers according to a

traditional and rather outdated notion of which segment of the audience is most valuable, a segment known as the commodity audience.

Niche Cable Channels and the Commodity Audience

The market for the commodity audience is one of the three television markets that Meehan identifies (the other two being the market for ratings and the market for programs). Each of these markets affects the others to create the structure of the television industry, within which the need to secure ratings and deliver the “right” audience is used to justify the types of programs that are financed, produced, and aired. This feedback loop between the three markets was forged during the pre-television years of the late 1920s and early 1930s radio broadcasting, and from these earliest decades of the industry the networks, advertisers, and ratings monopolist hierarchized the commodity audience and conceived of white middle- and upper-class men as the “right” audience. This perception persists today with only minor alterations (“Heads of Household” 205). Prior to the 2010 rebrand, IFC had avoided relying on this traditional market structure by operating under a sponsorship model, in which advertisers could sponsor IFC On-Demand or a block of the channel’s on-air programming. For example, in 2008, before the rebrand and the shift to advertiser-supported series, Unilever’s Axe brand sponsored blocks of IFC On-Demand digital shorts, and on-air sponsors like Geico, Piaget, and Absolut Vodka supported segments of the programming schedule (Hampp, “Indie Film Channels”). The sponsorship model enabled IFC to air movies

without commercial interruptions but restricted the cable channel's potential advertising earnings; before the rebrand, 80% of IFC's revenues came from cable and satellite subscriptions (Hampp, "Indie Film Channels"). The addition of original scripted series gave IFC a means to better control its brand identity and to reach a wider audience with a greater number of media formats, but the inclusion of original programming necessitated a switch to the traditional advertiser-supported model. Unlike HBO, which as a premium cable channel earns revenues from exclusive subscriptions to HBO services, IFC earns revenues from cable companies that package it as an upgraded service along with other film-based channels. This meant that IFC would need to attract advertisers to raise the necessary funds to bankroll more original series, and to do this the channel would have to deliver a very specific audience to its prospective advertisers—prompting the detailed descriptions of "Responsible Rebels" and "Authentic Influencers" found in the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide*.

The features of what IFC claims are its key demographics raise questions, however, about whether the channel has merely sought to win the traditional commodity audience under the guise of targeting a niche demographic. During the rebrand campaign, IFC reported to trade publications and to its prospective advertisers that its core audience was overwhelmingly young, white, male, and affluent (Guthrie). The channel seemed to display a circular logic that assumed the rebrand and its new original programming ought to appeal specifically to this group because it comprised the bulk of IFC's viewership, and it comprised the bulk of IFC's viewership because of the channel's

existing programming. The fact that IFC described its target audience and its actual viewership as primarily young, white, male, and wealthy is not arbitrary—this demographic has long been regarded by advertisers and networks as the most valuable segment of the television audience. When different values are assigned to various portions of the audience, it becomes necessary to differentiate the audience as a commodity from the audience as a site of reception. Approaching the television audience from the theoretical framework of feminist political economy, Eileen Meehan distinguishes the commodity audience from the viewing audience, meaning the snapshot of viewers captured by ratings data. The commodity audience has, as Meehan asserts, “nothing to do with the people who [watch] television,” and instead refers to an ideal audience that is marketed and sold to advertisers by networks and is comprised of the “consumerist caste”—the group with enough “disposable income, access, and desire to loyally purchase brand names and to habitually make impulse purchases” (“Gendering the Commodity Audience” 314-315).

Meehan argues that this construction of the commodity audience as male, white and middle to upper class occurred not because this demographic actually represented the most *quality* with maleness, whiteness, and upper classness. This is apparent, according to Meehan, because the decisions of advertisers, networks, and ratings firms do not operate according to the logic of the market. She notes the expansion of women’s involvement in the workforce as an example:

As women achieved greater—though not perfect—economic equality, they would seem likely candidates for inclusion in *the* audience. Yet, despite the

ratings monopolist's adoption of categories to sort viewers by occupational status, women remained marginalized as niches. Male remained the object of the rating firm's art, with upscale males the most prized trophies. ("Gendering the Commodity Audience" 320)

This does not mean that female audience members or other "niche" demographics have historically been completely ignored by advertisers, networks, and ratings firms, but that these demographics were treated as special interest groups and relegated to ghettoized programming hours (Hilmes 182). Although networks sought to target male viewers during primetime hours—as opposed to the assumed female daytime viewer—Meehan notes that primetime was viewed as an opportunity to access not a male audience but *the* audience. "As *the* audience," Meehan observes, "the white male commodity audience had a 'higher quality' for which advertisers willingly paid" ("Gendering the Commodity Audience" 317). *The* audience grew narrower in the 1960s, when ABC and NBC successfully lobbied the A.C. Nielsen Company (ACN) to include age in audience demographics research. Audiences between the ages of 18 and 34 were perceived to be the most aggressive consumers and consequently of greatest value to advertisers, and this age bracket was quickly incorporated into formulations of the commodity audience. The boundaries of this group shrank a second time after the cable network boom of the 1980s and 90s, defining *the* audience as white male cable subscribers between the ages of 18 to 34. Despite representing only a fraction of American television viewers, this group continues to be the most sought after by networks and advertisers alike, a phenomenon that can be understood through the higher hegemonic status placed upon maleness, whiteness, youth, and higher-class status.

The association of the masculinized commodity audience with primetime programming is significant because primetime is often the scheduling block during which networks showcase their “signature” programming, the series or collection of series that most clearly represents the network’s brand identity (Turow 104). Signature shows also frequently portray or refer to the network’s desired audience, making such programming a rich source for determining the most valued audience of a particular network. A signature series carries the added benefit of generating word-of-mouth publicity among members of the target audience, which in turn attracts advertisers to the network. Turow argues that the signature show is part of a three-prong strategy employed by cable networks to attract two different kinds of viewers: members of the broad, multi-demographic “mass” audience sought by broadcast networks, who boost the network’s overall ratings, and a “super core” audience of devoted viewers, preferably from a specific, desirable demographic that could then be sold to advertisers (104). While networks strive for high ratings across demographics, high ratings among particularly desirable audience segments can be more lucrative, and a program with lower overall viewership than its competitors might still be able to command a higher price for its advertising slots if it performs better certain demographics. While the other two components—i.e., a bold promotional campaign and brand-compatible syndicated content—play a crucial role in constructing a network’s brand identity, original programming and signature shows in particular represent an opportunity for the network to exert the most creative control over how its identity will be constructed.

“Wherever Indie Lives:” Portlandia as IFC’s Signature Series

Following Turow’s definition, *Portlandia* is unequivocally the signature series of IFC. The show began as a web series called *ThunderAnt*, co-created by Fred Armisen, a longtime *Saturday Night Live* cast member and occasional punk-rock drummer, and Carrie Brownstein, a guitarist for the indie band Wild Flag and the now-disbanded legendary riot-grrrl act Sleater-Kinney. The duo wrote and performed in short sketches that frequently referred to Portland’s neighborhoods and culture (Brownstein has lived in the city since 2000), and, with the help of *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels’s production company, pitched the project to IFC in 2010. The timing was fortunate as the channel was gearing up for the rebrand and was eager to develop original series, and the show was soon green-lit for a January 2011 premiere. *Portlandia* is a half-hour sketch-comedy series with a primary object of satire: life in trendy urban neighborhoods and their self-consciousness hipster inhabitants. The show, which borrows its name from the almost 35-foot-tall sculpture by artist Raymond Kaskey in downtown Portland, uses the city of Portland as a catchall for the indie culture it parodies. Well-known Portlanders feature heavily in guest starring roles, as do indie musicians, actors, and comedians from Brownstein and Armisen’s circles of friends and colleagues. Actor Kyle MacLachlan, likely best known to *Portlandia*’s viewers as Agent Dale Cooper in *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), has a recurring role as the Mayor of Portland, with real-life mayor Sam Adams playing his assistant. While the series strives for a level of realism by shooting at private homes and popular local businesses like Powell’s Books, the Portland of *Portlandia* looks

almost dream-like, awash in saturated hues and perpetually sunny despite its rainy reputation. This version of Portland is populated by a variety of characters that parody alternative culture, most of them played by Armisen and Brownstein themselves—“freegan” dumpster divers throwing a dinner party, members of an adults-only hide-and-seek league, overly aggressive bike messengers, and activists who organize an “Allergy Pride Parade.” DIY culture, sustainable business practices, and locavorism are all common themes on the show; one well-known sketch, “Ordering the Chicken,” has Brownstein and Armisen as a middle-aged couple on a dinner date endlessly quizzing their waitress about the restaurant’s locally raised, free-range chicken. When the waitress brings them a glossy photo of the chicken in life—“His name was Collin,” she says—they press her about his social life and decide they will need to visit the chicken farm themselves in order to make an informed ethical decision. Brownstein explained the inspiration for this humor in a January 2012 interview with *New York Magazine*:

In general, things in a place like Portland are really great, so little concerns become ridiculous. There are a lot of people here who can afford—financially but also psychologically—to be really, really concerned about buying local, for instance...I was standing in line at Whole Foods, and the guy in front of me says, ‘I really wish you guys sold locally made fresh pasta.’ And the cashier says, ‘Look, we do.’ And the guy says, ‘No, no—that’s from Seattle.’ Really? You don’t have a bigger battle? (Talbot 1)

The show addresses a viewership that likely disavows the hipster label but is immersed in the culture. When a sketch from the first season in which Brownstein and Armisen play cheerful design consultants with only one piece of advice—“Put a bird on it!”—became a viral success in its own right, a *Salon* culture writer wrote,

The first time I saw “Put a Bird on It,” I made a mental inventory of my own birded totes and T-shirts and saw them as trite for the first time. Ashamed, I recognized myself. Then I immediately forwarded a link for the video to friends — the first rule of getting the joke is to make sure everyone knows you get it (Keane).

The twee aesthetic of do-it-yourself and artisanal entrepreneurship is a recurring subject on *Portlandia*, and many sketches feature mock businesses like a company that makes handmade light bulbs, a boutique that sells different kinds of knots, and a husband-wife team who pickle everything from eggs to broken high heels to unwanted CD jewel cases.

The show has also brought the IFC its highest ratings ever (Goldsmith). Overall viewership doubled from the first season to the second, and promotional material from the 2012 IFC spring upfront asserted that this increase included a 327% increase in male viewers between the ages of 18 and 49 and a 128% increase in DVR and On Demand viewing for all adults ages 18-49. Additionally, the cable channel claimed that 40% of the audience for *Portlandia*’s Season Two premiere was tuning into the channel for the first time (P&L Media). *Portlandia* was the face of IFC at the channel’s spring 2012 upfront, which was dubbed “Upfrontlandia” and featured live performances from Armisen and Brownstein (Goldsmith). The series has also received the most critical acclaim of IFC’s new original shows; in 2011, it won a Peabody Award as well as an Emmy for costume design, and in 2012 the second season received two more Emmy nominations in the writing and directing categories for variety series. The popular, critical, and financial success of *Portlandia* prompted the launch of a live music-comedy tour featuring Armisen and Brownstein called, simply, “*Portlandia*: The Tour” from December 2012 to January

2013, which promoted the Season Three premiere in January. The show has become such a pop-culture staple that it is parodied in an episode of *The Simpsons* that originally aired December 9th, 2012 (“The Day the Earth Stood Cool”), in which Armisen, Brownstein, and *Portlandia* guest star Patton Oswalt play a family of hip Portlanders who move to Springfield. More recently, American Express has released a series of commercials that feature Brownstein as a number of satirical, *Portlandia*-esque characters—a nerdy tech-startup CEO, a sitar instructor, a suburban mom, a snobbish record collector—all shopping with different AmEx cards while a narrator explains that the company offers “a card for every character.” As part of its 2013 spring upfront, IFC announced that it has renewed the show for Seasons Four and Five, each with ten episodes that will air in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

As IFC’s signature series, *Portlandia* provides an excellent case study of the rebrand. It is the most critically and financially successful of IFC’s post-rebrand original series and the one with the most pop-culture exposure. The show also includes virtually all of the components IFC has sought to include in its post-rebrand identity; a scripted, half-hour comedy format that parodies the culture of the channel’s desired indie audience and manages to incorporate both music and comedy by featuring a comedian with musical ability and a musician with comedic ability. Despite its position as IFC’s signature program, however, *Portlandia* is exceptional in that it is the only currently airing original series that includes women both onscreen and behind the camera—costar and co-creator Carrie Brownstein is the most visible, but three out of the series’ five credited

writers are women (including Brownstein), as are a number of the show's producers. A small number of the channel's past original series have employed women in some or all of these positions, and a few short-lived series featured women prominently. One series, *The Minor Accomplishments of Jackie Woodman* (2006-2007) starred two actresses in the lead roles and involved women working in all areas of production, while another, a hybrid puppet-cooking show called *Food Party* (2009-2010), had a female creator-host. A sketch comedy series featuring the all-female comedy troupe Variety Shac was green-lit during the rebrand yet never made it to television. Significantly, all of these series either predated the 2010 rebrand or did not survive it. With the exception of *Portlandia*, the original programming currently airing on IFC is nearly exclusively created and written by men and also casts men in the majority of central onscreen roles.⁵ The reality show *Whisker Wars* (2011-), which follows competitive facial hair growers, spotlights an exclusively male pastime; *Trapped in the Closet* (2005-2012), a thirty-three-part musical series written and performed by R&B singer R. Kelly; variety-game shows *Comedy Bang! Bang!* and *Bunk* (2012-), both star male comedians as hosts; *The Whitest Kids U'Know*, features an all-male sketch comedy troupe; and the scripted comedy series *Bullet in the Face* (2012) and *The Increasingly Poor Decisions of Todd Margaret* each feature only one woman in their ensemble casts.

⁵ Consistent with Martha Lauzen's findings for women working in the television industry, women working behind the scenes on IFC's original series were most likely to be producers. Every original series on IFC has hired at least one female producer or executive producer, though far fewer worked in roles like director, writer, creator, editor, or director of photography.

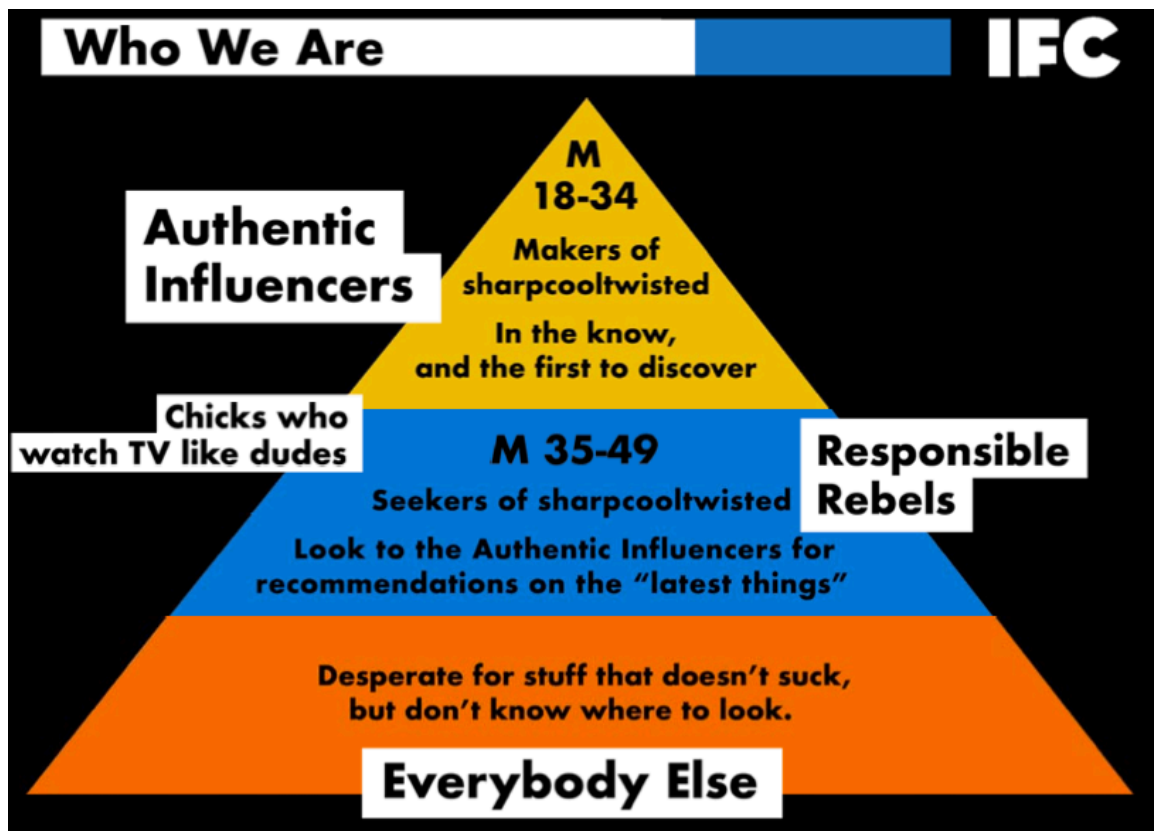
At the channel's spring 2013 upfronts, IFC revealed twelve forthcoming shows—all of them scripted half-hour comedies—in various stages of development. Two of these projects feature two female leads—*Garfunkel & Oates*, about the fictional misadventures of the eponymous musical duo (comprised of musician-comedians Riki Lindhome and Kate Micucci), and *Two Idiots*, created and co-written by Megan Mullaly and Tina Kapousis, who play two women living in a Beverly Hills hotel. Speaking to *The Hollywood Reporter* for a rather over-congratulatory article about the channel's increased representation of female writers and comedians, IFC's senior vice president of original programming, Debbie DeMontreaux, said the two shows were part of an effort toward greater inclusivity. "We're really trying to broaden the scope of comedy on our air," she said in the interview, "and with that comes different genres and different sexes" (Goldberg). Of course, two female-driven shows of twelve is hardly a paradigm shift, and a lineup made exclusively of half-hour scripted comedies does not represent a variety of genres

Despite these meager efforts to boost the presence of female voices on IFC, the gendered construction of the cable channel's commodity audience is quite striking, and the channel is very straightforward about the fact that it targets male viewers. The majority of trade press articles that cover the rebrand in spring 2010 specifically mention men as IFC's target audience and connect the visual and programming elements of the rebrand to an effort to attract this demographic. Sometimes the reporting revealed implicit assumptions about male-oriented programming. For example, when *Multichannel*

News reported, “The network, whose audience is 70% male, is continuing to place a greater emphasis on comedy both through development and acquisitions,” the implication that IFC would use comedies to lure male viewers is self-evident (Reynolds). Other coverage was rather more upfront, as when a *Hollywood Reporter* journalist wrote, “The company said the tagline and focus [on original comedies] reflects ‘the attitude of its influential 70% male audience’” (Szalai).

It seems odd that IFC does not present *Portlandia* as a show that features female perspectives, particularly given Brownstein’s past involvement with feminist music movements. Promotional materials for *Portlandia* indicate that IFC expects the show’s audience to already be familiar with Armisen and Brownstein. The duo’s past projects—*SNL* for Armisen, Sleater-Kinney and Wild Flag for Brownstein—are never referred to in print, online, or on-air promos, yet both are presented as familiar faces; often they are referred to by their first names alone. Despite this presumed familiarity on the part of the audience, Brownstein’s connection to the feminist underground punk movement riot grrrl and her now-defunct band Sleater-Kinney is virtually invisible. Other than occasional guest appearances from Brownstein’s band-mates and other feminist rock musicians, the closest *Portlandia* comes to alluding to her involvement in this scene is a popular recurring sketch called “Feminist Bookstore,” which parodies stereotypes of humorless second-wave feminists. The reason for the absence of Brownstein’s role in the intersection of gender politics and indie-rock culture is not difficult to surmise. *Portlandia* is a light-hearted sketch comedy show meant to poke fun

at indie culture, tending more toward the absurd than a cultural critique. Furthermore, the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide* explicitly discourages the use of promotional language that may appear “non-commercial” or unappealing to advertisers and content that could be perceived as provocative. This illustrates another reason why *Portlandia* provides an excellent case study for the IFC rebrand—the series downplays Brownstein’s involvement with the underground, anti-corporate, politically conscious indie music of the 1990s, just as IFC itself began to downplay its former brand identity as a cable channel invested in the promotion of independently produced film projects.



“Who We Are.”
IFC Brand Book & Style Guide, 2010.
 [Figure 3.1]

IFC also explicitly refers to the value of male viewers in internal company documents and promotional materials designed to attract advertisers. In the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide*, the channel's gendered construction of its audience is strikingly depicted in an infographic that illustrates the hierarchy of potential viewers (Fig. 3.1). The graphic is shaped like a pyramid, with males ages 18-34 (M18-34)—which IFC dubs “Authentic Influencers”—at the top. Beneath them are males ages 35-49 (M35-49)—“Responsible Rebels,” a group easily swayed by the tastes of Authentic Influencers. The audience segment at the bottom of the pyramid is simply described as “Everybody Else.” A caption marked “Chicks who watch TV like dudes” floats to the side of the pyramid, implying that this demographic is not actively sought after through the marketing campaign. The exclusion of “chicks” even from the “Everybody Else” category is consistent with the television industry's treatment of female viewers as a niche audience. Using a comparative case study of ESPN and Lifetime, Meehan demonstrates that to target a female audience is to create niche programming, whereas a male-oriented channel avoids being labeled a narrowcast network in both trade and popular discourses (“Gendering the Commodity Audience” 319).

Although the gender of these groups is defined as male in the brand book, the names “Authentic Influencers” and “Responsible Rebels” do not necessarily denote a particular gender. Significantly, an updated version of these groups, meant to reflect the multiplatform viewing habits of the cable channel's “younger, male, tech savvy audience,” uses much more gendered language to describe them. In a recent interview

with *The Cable Center*, IFC President Jennifer Caserta described IFC's target audience as M18-34 "Content Cowboys," the "trendsetters who are voracious about the way they consume content" and M35-49 "Captains of Influence" who use DVRs and On Demand and actively recommend content online ("Ask-A-Maverick"). The use of more explicitly masculine terms like "Captains" and "Cowboys" to describe the core IFC audience indicates that the channel considers its male-oriented marketing strategy to be a success and is only increasing its efforts to target male viewers.

It is worth noting that the highly gendered language in IFC's marketing materials were engineered by a female IFC executive, Jennifer Caserta, whose leadership role in the rebrand process earned her a promotion from executive vice president to president. Caserta claims credit for labeling IFC's (unquantified) female viewers as "Chicks Who Watch TV Like Dudes," and says she counts herself among this group. In numerous interviews with trade publication, Caserta describes her personal taste in music, film, and television as "typically male," and credits this taste for the success of the rebrand among IFC's target demographic ("Jennifer Caserta's Plan"). Before the 2010 rebrand, Caserta oversaw a variety of viral marketing campaigns designed to attract male viewers, including a particularly sexist marketing stunt in which IFC paid a street team of "Pulp girls"—semi-nude female spokesmodels wearing body paint inspired by the costumes of *Reservoir Dogs* characters—to distribute promotional material for the 2005 "Summer of IFC" campaign. Caserta, then the cable channel's senior vice president of marketing, described the promotion as an aggressive appeal to IFC's target demographic of young

male viewers. “The way we market to men tends to take a very grass-roots approach,” she told *The Hollywood Reporter*. “With the ‘Pulp’ girls, we’re looking to get them talking” (Wallenstein).

Another motivation for IFC’s increasingly gendered marketing strategies is the need to place the channel’s new original content in competition with TV brands that have already dominated the market of cable-channel comedy series. In choosing to place original scripted half-hour comedies at the center of its new brand identity and rebrand campaign, IFC placed itself in direct competition with other cable channels that already aggressively court a white male audience between the ages of 18 and 35, and many of those channels are deeply invested in the half-hour scripted comedy format. In a graphic designed specifically for prospective advertisers attending the channel’s 2012 upfront, IFC explicitly identifies the cable channels it believes to be its direct competitors—FX, Syfy, Comedy Central, Adult Swim, Spike, and G4, a channel marketed toward young male gamers.⁶ With the exception of G4, all of these channels consistently rank among the twenty-five top-performing cable channels in the 18-49 demographic, a position IFC has yet to secure for itself (TV by the Numbers). The graphic presents the logos for each channel topped with a different masculine haircuts under the proclamation that IFC’s rivals are “Slick and loud. It’s TV for dudes.” Below this graphic a lone green

⁶ It is worth noting that some of these rival cable channels have also undergone rebrand campaigns relatively recently. The Sci Fi Channel became Syfy in 2009 in order to exert greater control over its brand identity than it could under its formerly un-trademark-able name. G4 is presently undergoing a major rebrand campaign to become Esquire Network, which will air content in line with the *Esquire* men’s magazine brand as well as syndicated programming from NBCUniversal.

Siberian Husky faces into a pack of identical, colorless dogs beneath the ad copy: “We’ve got a different perspective. Always on. Slightly off.” In other words, IFC stands out from the pack of cable channels clamoring to attract male viewers with in-your-face programming and marketing campaigns. It’s not that IFC is not offering “TV for dudes,” but is offering content for *hip* dudes who are tired of the same old thing. In this way, IFC alludes to its supposed niche audience of indie viewers while simultaneously laying claim to the coveted commodity audience comprised of young white males.



"Meet Our Competitors," excerpt from the 2012 IFC upfront deck. P&L Media.
[Figure 3.2]

Given all of IFC's efforts to cater to the channel's target demographic of young, white, affluent men (and to convince advertisers that members of this group watch IFC in high numbers), it seems significant that network's most successful original series to come out of the rebrand is made with the input of women with backgrounds in gender-progressive media production. It also seems significant that the entire rebrand campaign was orchestrated by a self-described "chick who watches TV like a dude." Both these points complicate the very notion of watching television "like a chick" or "like a dude." As Laura Stempel Mumford argues,

there is no intrinsic connection between biological femininity and any particular viewing sensibility, or any direct and automatic relationship between gender and response. Instead, feminist TV scholars point to women's socially constructed social position(s) and the ways in which particular cultural artifacts—e.g. television programmes—inscribe a position for women viewers that evokes the cultural skills associated with femininity (120).

Or, in the case of IFC, the ways in which television programming inscribes a position for *male* viewers that evokes the cultural skills associated with *masculinity*. At least, that is IFC's goal; whether the channel is actually performing better among male viewers is a murky subject. In her history of the broadcast networks' competition for ratings, Meehan writes, "The commodity audience was knowable only through the ratings that measured it and those ratings were the outcome of corporate rivalries, alliances and manipulations ("Gendering the Commodity Audience" 315). Similarly, the audience is only knowable to advertisers, the press, the audience, and the scholar through the ratings and demographics data that are released by the networks themselves. ACN charges a

high premium for its services, putting it out of reach as a feasible source for the average researcher, and it is often in the interest of the network to avoid releasing the entirety of its data. It is therefore difficult to determine the precise proportion of female viewers of, for example, *Portlandia*, because IFC does not make these numbers available the way it does for total audience numbers and for males as a subset—a fact that is itself revealing of the extremely gendered nature of the commodity audience. IFC and indeed all cable channels have their own agendas for the numbers they release, and the information they make available cannot be accepted as a completely accurate portrait of the breakdown of their audience.

If the gender breakdown of IFC's viewership is not as overwhelmingly male as the channel reports, this would mean that the channel's rebranding campaign appeals to sexist associations of supposedly masculine tastes with quality. This association has occurred historically among advertisers and broadcast and cable channels, as mentioned earlier in this paper, and it has also occurred historically on IFC, although before the 2010 rebrand the channel's major source of masculine "quality" was independent film. Perhaps the aggressive marketing toward male viewers is an attempt on the part of IFC to retain its claim to the masculine "quality" of cinema while still padding its programming lineup with traditionally feminized television content. It is also possible that IFC constructs a male audience to be sold to advertisers while simultaneously relying on viewers of all genders to boost the channel's overall ratings and increase *Portlandia* DVD sales. Unfortunately, without the availability of complete ratings

data, it is difficult to determine the extent to which IFC's self-reported audience data accurately reflects the channel's viewing audience, whether overall or for individual programs.

Conclusion

This thesis has set out to examine the changes in brand identity, image, and programming that took place during IFC's rebrand campaign in 2010, and suggests that the channel's rebranded identity centers on the discursive site of indieness or indie culture, rather than its pre-rebrand identity, which was situated around independent film culture in particular. Each chapter of this project addresses a specific aspect of how this notion of indieness was constructed and to what end. As chapter one illustrates, IFC's brand identity prior to the rebrand tapped into a definition of indieness that was heavily informed by the American independent film and music movements of the 1990s. In chapter two, the shift in the core of IFC's brand identity becomes clear through the language, imagery, and programming strategies established by the rebrand campaign. Chapter three illustrates that the construction of indieness at the core of the new IFC brand identity was a particularly masculine one, with the channel aggressively marketing to young white male viewers with its post-rebrand promotional materials and its scripted-comedy-format programming—and then sold those viewers to prospective advertisers. The prioritization of this commodity audience is also explicitly stated in the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide*, videos and printed material for advertiser upfronts, and in press statements by Jennifer Caserta, the IFC executive who engineered the rebrand campaign.

Contributions

This project has aimed to contribute to research on the film channel, a rather

understudied topic in television studies. Recent scholarship in media studies has explored case studies of cable-channel brand identities formed on the basis of other types of identities— Sarah Banet-Weiser’s work on a kid’s channel like Nickelodeon, for example. There is little scholarship to date, however, on cable channels that have constructed their brands around film culture. The majority of these film channels have undergone substantial rebrands over the course of the past decade and have placed original television series at the core of their brands. With the notable exception of HBO, most of the film channels in question—AMC, Bravo, FX, and IFC—have yet to be subjected to in-depth analysis. This project seeks to amend this gap in cable television studies while examining the role of a cable channel in the brand-identity management of multimedia company like IFC Entertainment, which is invested in film and television production and film distribution.

Additionally, this project strives to build upon feminist media scholarship that deals with the gendered nature of cable channel branding, particularly for identity-based channels that are not founded upon gender identities (a greater body of work exists on cable channels marketed specifically to women, notably Meehan and Bryar’s study of Lifetime). Sarah Murray’s work on the gendered discourses around foodie-ism that appear throughout Cooking Channel’s branding efforts has been a great influence on this study in that regard, and this project seeks to contribute to the task of analyzing the implicit role of gender in the construction of cable brands.

Limitations

This project is limited by some key constraints, the first of which being a lack of original research on reception. A reception study of IFC's viewership would be particularly useful in my discussion of how the channel constructs the identities of its viewers for advertisers. Without this research and without access to IFC's internal documents or ACN data, I am only to make an educated guess regarding the truthfulness of IFC's claims about the demographic breakdown of its viewership. To do this, I must rely on the data IFC releases and the partial cable ratings released by web sites like TV By The Numbers, which only list the twenty-five cable channels with the highest ratings each week, as well as the information that I have been able to find from paratextual materials like graphic-design portfolios, trade-press coverage, IFC promotional materials, and the texts constituted by IFC original programming. I have been fortunate to find the *IFC Brand Book & Style Guide*, a document meant for IFC employees, as well as information from advertising agency portfolios regarding their involvement in the rebrand and what IFC commissioned from their firms.

Another limitation of this project is an absence of industrial interviews. Assuming that they would agree to an interview, former and current IFC executives could offer great insight into the 2010 rebrand process that is not captured by formal statements to trade publications. Candidates for interview subjects include Evan Shapiro, who was president of IFC at the time of the rebrand; Jonathan Sehring, who oversaw Bravo's

programming in the early nineties and helped launch IFC and now serves as president of Sundance Selects and IFC Films; Debbie DeMontreux, IFC's senior vice president of original programming since 2007 and who, like Sehring, started out Bravo; and, most important to this project, Jennifer Caserta, who spearheaded the rebrand campaign as IFC's senior vice president of marketing and now serves as IFC's president and general manager. Without directly interviewing these executives, I am limited to statements they have made in press releases and via interviews with trade publications. As a result, the role of individuals in the rebrand is somewhat obfuscated—although it is clear that all of the above executives contributed to the rebrand campaign in some capacity and that Caserta played a particularly active role in the process, it remains difficult to attribute any single component of the rebrand to one individual or group of individuals. I therefore speak of the corporate entity of IFC as the “author” of the rebrand, which is not entirely accurate.

Time and budgetary constraints underpin each of these limitations. Greater financial resources would allow for access to more in-depth audience measurement data and make it possible to travel to conduct in-person interviews with IFC executives. In an expanded version of this project with more time and funding opportunities, I would include ACN data on IFC viewership as well as original audience research for *Portlandia*, analyzing the gender breakdown of fan comments on IFC's social networking sites, for example, or monitoring social media users who tweet or blog about the show.

Future Directions

IFC's shift from an interest-based (independent film) to an identity-based (consumers of indie culture) brand and the financial success brought about by this key aspect of rebrand likely indicate a difficult future for film-based cable channels. Additionally, the reliance upon original programming at the core of IFC's brand identity, a salient feature in the rebrand campaigns of other former film-based channels, suggests that cable channels no longer find it profitable to forge relationships with individual filmmakers that do not already have a relationship with the channel's production or distribution subsidiaries. This seems to be the model set forth by HBO, a channel whose film offerings are now largely limited to features and documentaries it has produced or distributed. This represents a significant loss to independent filmmakers, who formerly had in IFC a platform for making their films accessible to viewers after or in addition to a limited theatrical release. While online and On Demand releases make independent film distribution more accessible than ever before, a film channel like IFC plays an important role as programmer, conferring status onto films that are selected for air and generating publicity for them.

Perhaps further studies of IFC could examine whether the loss of this film channel is mitigated by IFC Entertainment's other efforts, particularly those of its distribution company, IFC Films, and the programming on Sundance Channel, which IFC now owns and operates. Just as Bravo's film and arts programming became more mainstream after it launched IFC, I predict that IFC will continue to air more Hollywood films and

original comedy television series until Sundance Channel becomes the exclusive film channel for independent features.

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